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Negotiating Identity in Newsprint: A Study of the Indian Chinese Community in Kolkata

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Abstract

As a marginalised community in Kolkata, the Indian Chinese community is concentrated in old and new Chinatown Kolkata, such as Tiretta Bazar and Tangra, by contributing to the natural and economic fabric of the society. This study explores the role of mainstream newspapers in framing the identity of the Indian Chinese community in Kolkata. Focusing on the incident-like shutdown of only the Mandarin newspaper of Kolkata named Seong Pow, this research study analyses the news presentation of the Kolkata edition of the selected English language newspapers. The narrative aspects of the newspapers are described in this study, considering the community identity as well as state discourse. This study focuses on qualitative content analysis of news published in the selected English language newspapers related to the shutdown of the city's only Mandarin newspaper. This study contributes to the debates on the representation of the mentioned marginalised community in Kolkata for representing the diasporic identity.

Keywords: #IndianChineseCommunity #SeongPow #Newspaper #MarginalisedCommunity #MediaRepresentation

Introduction

Background of the study

The Indian Chinese Community in Kolkata, who mostly live in the old and new Chinatown of Kolkata, is a significant ethnic group. This community is deeply rooted in its cultural heritage as well as its history of migration. The story of Kolkata's Chinatown has started with Atchipur, which is a few kilometres away from Kolkata. In the late 18th century, Atchew Tong established a Chinese settlement in Kolkata (Sahapedia, 2021). The cultural heritage of the mentioned community expresses its uniqueness in the social fabric of the city of joy. The historical aspect of this ethnic community considers the history of the Indian Chinese people searching for a homeland in a multi-ethnic city, as well as the transition from a commercial colonial environment to an attempt to survive in a postcolonial city in India. On the other hand, there is another version of the Chinese settlement in India, which states that Atchew was a trader of tea who was known as Yang Dajian. Warren Hastings granted around 650 bigahs of land at a rent of Rs. 45 yearly in return for tea (Roy, 2024). Yang established a sugar mill where many Chinese labourers were

employed. The business transaction between Hastings and Atchew is the core culmination of the developing commercial interest of the governor general with Qing China.

As per the history, Cheenapada or Chinatown is the place in Kolkata, where Indian Chinese people live. Old Chinatown is in Tiretta Bazar, and new Chinatown is in Tangra, where the cultural heritage of the aforesaid community is visible. These two areas are India's only existing Chinatown; however, the entire Chinese population in Kolkata is dwindling (BBC, 2023). The local Indian Chinese residents are trying to tie up with the Chinese community of Singapore to refurbish the area. In addition to this, Indian Chinese people in Kolkata not only try to preserve their culture but also promote tourism. In this context, it can be stated that the Indian Chinese community in Kolkata had a newspaper named Seong Pow. This newspaper's press is located in Chinatown, Kolkata. It was the only Mandarin newspaper published from Kolkata for disseminating news among Indian Chinese people in Kolkata. This newspaper was started in 1969 by Lee Yun Chin in Kolkata (News 18, 2023).

Statement of the problem

The newspaper named Seong Pow was officially called the Overseas Chinese Commerce of India. This was a daily newspaper published in Mandarin, shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic (Times Now, 2023). This newspaper was for the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata who were mainly involved in different occupations such as the tannery trade and so on; however, they lacked their access to the communal updates and Mandarin news. This newspaper was successful in filling up the gaps by publishing translations from Chinese language as well as English language dailies. Along with that, this newspaper was responsible for covering local events, cultural events, business developments of the Chinese diaspora, as well as social announcements.

This newspaper had a wide circulation of approximately 2000 copies in the 1980s. The editorial process of this newspaper had evolved from the hand-set wooden blocks to a dedicated printing press (Indpaedia, 2023). From the year 2010, the circulation of this daily had decreased to 190 to 200 copies per day. During the pandemic, the newspaper shut down. The circulation of this newspaper ceased during 2020. After the death of its editor named Kio-tsai Chang, in July 2020, this newspaper stopped printing. One of the reasons for this was that there was no successor to the editor who was trained in Mandarin. Mandarin literate younger Indian Chinese people in Tangra had decreased (Saklani, 2024). For this reason, the newspaper faced structural challenges to run the business. In addition to this, the recruitment of capable staff who were mandarin educated was very difficult for this newspaper. Youth in the Chinese diaspora of Kolkata are mostly comfortable with the Bengali language or the Hindi language rather than Mandarin. It led to limiting the editorial capacity and potential readership.

The closure of the only Mandarin newspaper in Kolkata epitomises the disappearing visibility of the heritage of the Chinese diaspora. This affects the cultural identity of the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata (Xing, 2009). Shutdown of Seong Pow refers to the linguistic, cultural and historical symbol of loss for the Indian Chinese community in Kolkata. However, the Chinese community in Kolkata has decided to revive this newspaper. This research sheds light on the representation of this issue in the English language national newspaper in Kolkata.

Literature review

Ethnic media play a pivotal role in negotiating as well as constructing cultural identity. The ethnic media, such as ethnic newspapers and other mass media, have been established in the field of media studies and the Diaspora. In order to preserve cultural heritage, ethnic media's functionality can be described as a

cultural repository as well as an instrument. According to the study of Hall (2015), cultural identity in the context of Diaspora is not properly fixed; however, it can be negotiated through symbols along with media narratives. From the opinion of Hall (1989), cultural identity is shaped by power relations, migration as well as history. The Indian Chinese community preserved its cultural identity through the publication of the newspaper in the Mandarin language.

In the case of Kolkata's Indian Chinese Community, the only Mandarin language newspaper named Seong Pow served as a practical as well as symbolic link to Chinese values, language and heritage. This newspaper was established in the year 1969 (Xing, 2009). This newspaper was a key platform for the Chinese Diaspora for the purpose of articulation of the collective identity of the community rooted in shared experiences of their migration, language, as well as memory. In this regard, it has been recognised that the linguistic heritage of the mentioned community was preserved through the publication of this newspaper in Kolkata. This Mandarin language daily showcased the cultural presence within the dominance of English and the Bengali media ecosystem. Closure of this newspaper in Kolkata raises critical questions about the recognition, visibility, as well as transformation of cultural identity of the Chinese Diaspora in a postcolonial urban area. In addition to this, some of the media houses reported this incident by portraying it as the loss of cultural heritage. The disappearance of minority voices of the Chinese Diaspora in Kolkata is sentimentalised in the form of media coverage (Roy & Basu, 2021).

Different systematic factors are considered, such as demographic shifts, language loss and also political marginalisation that have led to the shutdown of the newspaper in Kolkata. Cultural identity of the Chinese Diaspora is negotiated due to the closure of the Seong Pow, and it is visible in the media narratives. This community is positioned as the vanishing remnant of Kolkata's adaptive cultural group. According to the concept of fixity of cultural difference, a concept given by Homi K Bhabha in 1994, mainstream media portrays the minority group in static terms, separated from the growing realities of their cultural identities (Bhabha, 1994).

An ethnic newspaper named Seong Pow acts as the hybrid production of identity, combining localised social context with the traditional cultural values. This newspaper was not only the preserver of the Chinese identity but also portrayed the authentic identity of the community. In this regard, this print media used an A4 sheet as well as desktop publishing for maintaining the community news coverage. However, the reader base was shrinking. The death of the Seong Pow's editor, as well as the pandemic of Covid-19, accelerated the closure of the newspaper. However, this newspaper was also under strain before these two major incidents. The shutdown of this newspaper reflects the board dynamics of the invisibility of culture as well as contested cultural identity in urban spaces (Biswas, 2022). Ethnic media is not only important for representing the community cohesion, but also it is significant to assert the presence in the public sphere.

Theoretical framework

From the study of Chong & Druckman (2007), it has been identified that framing theory is given by Erving Goffman as well as it has been expanded by Robert Entman, stating how media houses shape the information so that the audience interprets it. According to this theory, the media decides which information is shaped in which manner and how the audience perceives the information from the media house. Seong Pow was one of the oldest Mandarin newspapers, which shut down its publication due to the death of the editor as well as the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. A very few media houses in Kolkata have covered this issue, considering the loss of cultural heritage of the Chinese diaspora. The framing theory can be aligned with this research study as the issue of shutdown of the mentioned

newspaper is portrayed as the role of a heritage institution, i.e. Seong Pow of Indian Chinese people in Kolkata, and its shutdown as the end of an era. With the help of the facts as well as images, framing can be done in the media reporting (De Vreese, 2005). For this reason, this theory can be linked with this study, as different media houses have represented the issue by using facts and images.

Research gap

From the existing literature, it can be said that the cultural identity of the mentioned community in Kolkata is represented through its celebrations, cuisine and also media coverage of the only Mandarin newspaper. However, there is very limited literature about the shutdown of the Mandarin dailies in Kolkata. For this reason, the current study focuses on the reason for the closure of Seong Pow in Kolkata and how newspapers in Kolkata have represented the news in their media coverage.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are formulated as follows:

- To understand the response of the Indian Chinese community towards the closure of the only Mandarin newspaper named Seong Pow
- To analyse the way of representation by the selected English language national newspapers in Kolkata regarding the shutdown of Seong Pow
- To investigate the portrayal of the reasons behind the closure of Seong Pow by the selected English language national newspapers in Kolkata

Research questions

The research questions are listed below:

- How did the Indian Chinese community respond to the closure of the only Mandarin newspaper named Seong Pow in Kolkata?
- How do the selected English language national newspapers represent the news regarding the shutdown of the Seong Pow newspaper in Kolkata?
- How do the selected English language national newspapers portray the reasons behind the closure of Seong Pow in Kolkata?

Research Methodology

Philosophy of the research

The philosophy of the research study is considered as a belief for understanding the process of collecting as well as analysing information to get an outcome at the end of the entire research study. It has been found from the opinion of Saliya (2023), research philosophy helps a researcher to decide the way of generating outcomes in order to meet the research objectives. In this study, the interpretivism philosophy of research has been decided to follow for analysing the in-depth phenomenon in an effective manner. In order to generate a subjective meaning of the newspaper content, this philosophy of the study is followed.

Approach of the study

Approach of the study in the field of research refers to the overall plan for conducting data gathering and also analysis (Mulisa, 2022). In this research, considering three research approaches, only an inductive approach is used. It is because this approach is quite helpful for analysing qualitative data collected from

the selected newspaper related to the shutdown of the only Mandarin newspaper in Kolkata. This approach is effective for qualitative content analysis as it helps the researcher to understand the phenomenon from specific to general.

Research strategy

The strategy of the research is the overall plan for meeting the research objectives on a collective note. It helps to conduct the research in a systematic way. From the study of Mohajan & Mohajan (2022), it can be understood that a research strategy helps to complete the entire process of the research study within the stipulated time. This study follows a qualitative research strategy for meeting the research objectives.

Data collection

Data collection is an important factor for a researcher to analyse the information for answering the research questions at the end of the study. With the help of the gathered data, the researcher analyses the findings for generating an outcome effectively. In this research, the researcher has used qualitative or non-numeric data for understanding the portrayal of the shutdown of only Mandarin newspapers named Seong Pow by national level English newspapers in Kolkata. For doing qualitative research, the researcher has used content analysis considering the news related to the closure of the Mandarin newspaper.

Data analysis

In order to conduct the qualitative content analysis, in this research, the researcher has chosen two news articles and news content from those two newspapers. Only The Times of India has covered this news. Three news articles from The Times of India have been chosen for the qualitative content analysis.

Sampling process

The research study focuses on the non-probability sampling process to collect data on a significant note. As news related to the shutdown of the only Chinese newspaper is analysed, the researcher has selected purposive sampling for collecting data from different news articles. Only The Times of India has reported this issue in its 3 news articles. For this reason, the total sample size is 3. The unit of analysis of this study is the writing style of the news, language, framing, as well as tone of the news.

Findings and discussion

In Kolkata, the issue has been reported by only the Times of India. The digital version of this newspaper has published the news regarding the shutdown of the Seong Pow. A total of 3 news stories have been published on three different days.

News coverage of The Times on India on 22nd May 2023, regarding the closure of Seong Pow

This newspaper, in its 22nd May edition, has portrayed the closure of Seong Pow, the only Mandarin newspaper of the Indian Chinese community in Kolkata, as a tragic blow. In this news, a photograph of the front page of the Mandarin newspaper with a caption has also been published. The publication of this newspaper was halted during the first wave of the pandemic, as stated by this edition of The Times of India (Times of India, 2023). A brief history of the Mandarin language newspaper is given in this news report to portray the cultural heritage of the mentioned community in Kolkata. A statement by the President

of the Chinese Association of India regarding the closure of Seong Pow is also published in this news. The reason for the closure of the newspaper is explained in this news. This news article has also pointed out the effects of the Indo-Sino War in 1962.

News coverage of The Times of India on 2nd June 2023, regarding the revival of Seong Pow

This news article of The Times of India focuses on the importance of the cultural significance of the only Chinese newspaper in Kolkata, along with its revival to preserve the cultural identity of the minority (Times of India, 2023). This news article showcases the population of the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata as a shrinking community which has faced a significant loss due to the closure of the newspaper. A statement of Chinese Consul General Zha Liyou is also published in this news article, considering the difficulties faced by the community to sustain a daily newspaper in a multicultural society. A vivid image of the earlier decline of the newspaper is portrayed in this news article of The Times of India. The statement given by the community leader Wu Wei Yan is also described in this news article, quoting that the revived Mandarin newspaper would aim for an initial publication of around 250 copies within a few months.

News coverage of The Times of India on 2nd June 2023, regarding cultural preservation of the Indian Chinese community

This news article has published the information regarding the process of revival of Seong Pow in Kolkata for preserving the culture of the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata. In this news article, it is explained that translators, distributors, as well as editors have lost contact after the closure of the newspaper. For this reason, a new editor, named Yang Siao Hong, was recruited. She will be the first woman editor of this newspaper. This news article has also described that the revival of Seong Pow will disseminate information among 2000 strong members of the Indian Chinese community (Times of India, 2023). This news article has also quoted the statement given by the consul general named Liyou.

Analysis

With the help of open coding, common codes are found from the above content analysis, which are mentioned below.

- Cultural identity
- Cultural heritage
- Language Preservation
- Closure
- Revival
- Media coverage

These codes are helpful to develop themes to conduct content analysis.

Summary table of the content analysis

Codes	Themes
Cultural identity and cultural heritage	Importance of preservation of Identity and cultural heritage of the Indian Chinese community
Language preservation and closure	Effects of closure of the only Mandarin newspaper on the shrinking Chinese diaspora
Revival and media coverage	Influence of mainstream media for portraying the hope of revival of the Mandarin daily

Table 1: Summary table of Content analysis

Theme 1: Importance of preservation of Identity and cultural heritage of the Indian Chinese community

The newspaper plays a critical role to preserve the legacy of the Indian Chinese community by documenting the shutdown of Seong Pow. The history of the newspaper is also described in every news article of The Times of India. This Mandarin newspaper not only serves as a news outlet but also as a cultural archive (Aby, 2025). Ties between cultural heritage and cultural identity of the dwindling population of the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata are portrayed by Seong Pow. For this reason, it is required to preserve the identity as well as the cultural legacy of the shrinking Chinese community in Kolkata.

Theme 2: Effects of closure of the only Mandarin newspaper on the shrinking Chinese diaspora

The closure of the Seong Pow is more than a media event, as it has a huge impact on the shrinking Chinese population in the city of joy. This issue has emotional as well as social effects on the Chinese diaspora in Kolkata (Samanta & Chattopadhyay, 2024). The shutdown of the newspaper is a cultural loss for the mentioned community. This Mandarin newspaper was the symbol of the belonging of the minority voice in Kolkata. The closure of Seong Pow represents the deletion of a cultural institution linked to the collective memory of the remnants of the Chinese community in the multicultural society of Kolkata.

Theme 3: Influence of mainstream media for portraying the hope of revival of the Mandarin daily

Mainstream news media like the Times of India have brought attention to the loss of the cultural legacy of the Chinese community in Kolkata among people. The news articles published by this newspaper have a significant effect on the reader. News related to the revival of the only Mandarin daily in Kolkata influences the community members of the Chinese diaspora as well as other stakeholders. By highlighting the power of news representation, information regarding the revival of Seong Pow is disseminated among

people. It helps to influence social change as well as spark the efforts of preservation of cultural legacy (Roy, 2024).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the closure of the only Mandarin newspaper in Kolkata has marked a significant cultural loss for the cultural identity of the dwindling Chinese diaspora in Kolkata. Over the past decades, Seong Pow served as a crucial bridge to the heritage of the Indian Chinese community by providing community news, cultural insights and community updates. This minority community in Kolkata has faced several challenges to run the newspaper successfully, considering the preservation of their cultural heritage. Various aspects, such as a decrease in revenue as well as readership, contribute to the closure of the mentioned newspaper. As the population of the Indian Chinese community is declining, it has led to the shutdown of this Mandarin newspaper. Due to the barrier of language, the young generation of Indian Chinese struggles to write and read Mandarin. This is one of the core reasons behind the closure of this newspaper publication. The death of the editor is another reason why the newspaper failed to sustain its publication. Covid-19 pandemic halted this newspaper publication as well. Only The Times of India, in its three news articles, has reported the incident and represents this incident as an effort to preserve and document the history of the Indian Chinese community. Mainstream media can help in amplifying the marginalised voice to preserve the cultural significance in the society. The shutdown of the Mandarin newspaper serves as a reminder of the challenges faced by the minority community in sustaining as well as preserving their cultural heritage in the social fabric of Kolkata. Revival of this newspaper can be possible through collaborative efforts between historians, community members, and cultural organisations, considering the legacy of the only Mandarin newspaper. In order to preserve the cultural identity of the Chinese diaspora, community initiatives could be effective. The Times of India has documented the legacy of Seong Pow in its news articles to preserve the cultural heritage of the marginalised voice in Kolkata.

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