An Alternative Chinese Cinema: Early Diasporic Chinese Filmmaking

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Abstract

Most researches on the history of Chinese cinema usually examine film industries in three districts: mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan**.** Yet rather than conceiving of Chinese cinema along geo-political borders, this dissertation argues that Chinese cinema is a conceptual and de-territorialized culture that has been inadequately examined. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Chinese filmmakers formed a cross-border, Pacific Rim network of cinematic exchanges among various Chinese diasporic communities. This dissertation revisits this piece of forgotten history of Chinese cinema, and makes the case for a revised, transnational approach to the study of Chinese cinema.

It consists of three chapters that present groups of Chinese diasporic filmmakers and their transnational cinematic experiences in different historical conjunctions from the 1930s to the 1950s. As artists and entrepreneurs on the margins of traditional Chinese cinema, they help illuminate filmmaking exchanges not only within the nation-state but also between nation-states and cultures. Instead of narrating Chinese cinema as a monolithic national cinema, this study explores new relationships between Chinese filmmakers, traditional stage culture, language differences, Chinese ethnicity, and politics through a transnational and diasporic lens. It argues that Chinese cinema, from the very beginning, was the product of transnational movements of capital, people, and ideas among the Chinese diaspora. The global links among various Chinese communities initiated and sustained the development of Chinese cinema.

Chapter One examines the critical interactions between Chinese opera and early Chinese filmmaking in the early 1930s. Before the coming of film, opera reigned supreme as the most popular public entertainment. It greatly influenced the earliest filmmaking in China by providing a venue (teahouses and theaters), artistic sources (music, scripts and performers), and an audience.

This chapter illustrates how the earliest Chinese sound films of the 1930s created in different localities in and out of China relied heavily on Chinese opera for both plots and performers. Pioneer filmmakers included established opera masters such as Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian, who joined with Chinese film distributors like Kwan Man-ching and Chinese American directors like Joseph Sunn Jue. This chapter argues that the transnational Chinese opera culture provided the foundation for a transnational Chinese film culture.

Chapter Two centers on early Chinese transnational cinema in diasporic communities by re-discovering the Chinese American director and producer Esther Eng. Raised in San Francisco's Chinatown in a culture embracing both Cantonese opera and Hollywood films, Eng grew up immersed in a transnational diasporic Chinese diaspora that would have a major impact on her career as a trans-cultural film director. Wartime patriotism aroused by the events leading to WWII impelled her to go back and forth between the U.S. and China to make films for Chinese audiences in both countries. Eng and her contemporaries represent a diasporic cinema that was neither "Chinese cinema" nor "American cinema." By making and distributing films across the Pacific, Esther Eng shortened the distance between overseas Chinese and their compatriots in China. What's more, Eng's transnational filmmaking demonstrated the constantly changing geopolitical contours for Chinese filmmaking during wartime.

Chapter Three examines the cinematic connection between Hong Kong cinema and Southeast Asian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. When the Shanghai film industry was isolated from the rest of the world after 1949, the cinemas of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia became much closer. To sustain its theater circuits and to expand its markets in Southeast Asia, the Kong Ngee film company shifted its base from Singapore to Hong Kong and began making Cantonese films. By unveiling the Hong Kong-Nanyang nexus, this chapter argues that Hong Kong and Singapore

constituted a vibrant diasporic Chinese filmmaking network. Despite the volatility of Cold War politics, beginning in the middle of the 1950s Hong Kong cinema developed from being a peripheral part of Chinese national cinema to functioning as a hub of Chinese diasporic cinema.

In conclusion, this dissertation sketches the landscape of early transnational Chinese filmmaking in which cross-border filmmaking and individual filmmakers (both Chinese and overseas Chinese), traditional culture (such as Chinese operas and diverse language/dialects systems), and a massive diasporic audience (such as Chinese in North American and Southeast Asia) altogether defined and sustained Chinese filmmaking as cultural production. Meanwhile, a variety of complex social-political events, such as the Sino-Japanese War, the establishment of the PRC, and the Cold War, provided both chances and challenges for transnational Chinese filmmaking. It is the rich, complex, and continuing inter-/intra-cinematic dialogue between the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and diasporic communities that formed elsewhere that reveal the full extent of the changing, evolving, rupturing, and reforming course of Chinese cinema(s).

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Introduction

> I didn't want to tell the story from a place of being other. I didn't want to tell the story from a place of being marginalized and making a point of that. I wanted to tell the story from a place of being the center.
>
> —Lulu Wang, writer and director of "*The Farewell* (2019)"[1]

"too foreign for here, too foreign for home"

—Chinese American rapper Bohan Phoenix[2]

In 2019, *The Farewell* (别告訴她, 2009), a small-budget independent film directed by the Chinese-American female director/writer Lulu Wang 王子逸, achieved great commercial and critical success in the US.[3] Located in Changchun, a northern Chinese city, and based on the director's real personal experiences, this film tells a bitter-sweet story about love and deception in a Chinese family, reflecting familial conflicts, cultural differences and the issue of ethnic identity.[4]

Following its American success, in January 2020 this co-produced film was released in mainland China.[5] However, it failed to repeat its success with either audiences or critics. Heated discussions centered around how "authentic" this film is in telling a Chinese story.[6] Some viewers applauded the film as a friendly, down-to-earth depiction of a family in northern China. "The scenes of the daily lives of Chinese people is familiar. We are glad that it is not a repetition of stereotyped images such as the backwardness in the countryside, or some Bruce Lee-style action

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[1] Marina Fang, "'The Farewell' Is A Masterful Movie Where Representation Goes Beyond Identity," Huffpost, last accessed June 28, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-farewell-awkwafina-lulu-wang-representation_n_5d1e5003e4b0f3125680d1ec.

[2] "Q&A With Bohan Phoenix About Hip-Hop & Cultural Expression In China," University of Southern California, May 2, 2019, https://china.usc.edu/qa-bohan-phoenix-about-hip-hop-cultural-expression-china.

[3] Premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, *The Farewell* (2019) earned its leading actress, Awkwafina, a history-making Best Actress award at the 77th Golden Globes and the Best Feature in the Independent Spirit Awards in 2020. With a budget of 3 million US dollars, the worldwide box office of *The Farewell* (2019) was 22 million.

[4] Some critics think the success of *The Farewell* (2019)*, Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Oscar-winner *Parasite* (2019) show a continuum of Hollywood's interests in Asian and Asian-American films in recent years.

[5] *The Farewell* is a U.S.-China co-production between American film companies Big Beach, Depth of Field and Kindred Spirit and Chinese film company Ray Productions.

[6] Qin Chen, "Is 'The Farewell' Problematic: For Some in China, the Answer is Yes," Inkstone, January 10, 2020, https://www.inkstonenews.com/china/why-farewell-starring-awkwafina-doesnt-resonate-some-chinese-viewers/article/3045519.

features."[7] Others maintained that the film was made solely for western audiences because "The director shows a lack of understanding of the intricacies of Chinese culture. She is looking at Chinese society with an American gaze."[8] "It's not that Chinese people can't relate to the Chinese-American experience," another wrote, "it's that we are not going to be feeling [the connection to the story] as viscerally as an immigrant who left China at a young age."[9]

The mixed responses to the film in China showed Chinese audiences' complex feeling towards foreign films that take up themes related to China or to the Chinese people. On the one side, they are interested in how films treat Chinese stories and Chinese society, but on the other, they fear over-simplified, stereotypical conventions that have been so common in the past. In a time when Chinese culture and Chinese identity are more complicated and diverse than ever, Chinese audiences still consider films like *The Farewell* "too American."

Meanwhile, Americans viewers considered *The Farewell* as a Chinese film, because of its all-Asian cast and the use of Chinese dialogue. When the Golden Globes nominated *The Farewell* as Best Foreign Language Film, the director Lulu Wang, who grew up in Miami since the age of six, expressed her bewilderment,

> "They're not calling it an international film or a foreign film. They're saying it's in a foreign language — but it just means that you're then in a category with non-Americans. So *The Farewell* was in the category with a French film and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, which is Korean. But in many ways, I think that I'm closer identity-wise to maybe Scorsese who makes films about the Italian-American experience and the immigrant experience, which is what I'm doing. It's what *The Farewell* is. It's about being an immigrant, being a hyphenate."[10]

[7] From a commenter in Douban, a popular review site in China. https://movie.douban.com/subject/30390144/comments?status=P

[8] The much-lauded movie has a 98% "Certified Fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes. In comparison, on Douban, just 60% of the audience gave it a positive review.

[9] Chen, "Is 'The Farewell' Problematic."

[10] Dino-Ray Ramos, "The Farewell's Cultural Impact & Making Films That 'Challenge Traditional Boxes'," Deadline, December 30, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/12/the-farewell-director-lulu-wang-awkwafina-a24-interview-news-1202811108/.

Obviously, Wang considers herself very much an American director and "Chinese" is a prefix indicating her ethnic heritage. To Wang, *The Farewell* was also a "hyphenate" film, and challenged "what Americanness means."[11] However, producers, executives and audiences in both America and China neatly categorize the film as either an American or a Chinese story. In this sense, *The Farewell* seems "too foreign" for both countries because of the simplified classification criteria of race, culture and language. To Wang, *The Farewell* surpassed the boundaries of ideology, race, language and nationality and dealt with universal issues such as family conflicts, generation gaps, displacement and place.[12] "Being a hyphenate" supposed to display her diversity would instead lead to "a divided mind, an irrevocably split identity, or a type of paralysis between two cultures or nations."[13] Wang's journey of making and circulating *The Farewell* proved the difficulty of making films that resonate equally in China and the United States.

The controversy surrounding *The Farewell* also showed the peripheral and marginalized status of the ethnic Chinese filmmakers and their film productions in both China and America. In the 1990s, several Chinese American films such as Wayne Wang 王颖's *The Joy Luck Club* (喜福会, 1993) and Ang Lee 李安's *The Wedding Banquet* (喜宴,1993) won important Hollywood and European film awards and launched a "China Chic" in the western world.[14] In 2000, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龍, 2000) was well received by critics and the moviegoing public, and revitalized the international craze for martial arts films initiated by Bruce

[11] Alissa Wilkinson, "The Farewell director Lulu Wang on challenging 'what Americanness means'," Vox, July 16, 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/7/16/20687739/lulu-wang-farewell-interview-identity.
[12] Fang, "'The Farewell' Is A Masterful Movie."
[13] Hamid Nacify, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 16.
[14] In the mid-1990s, *Time* magazine dubbed the critical success of not only Chinese American films but also Asian American films as "China Chic." For example, Japanese American director Kayo Hatta's *Picture Bride* (1994) was a representative film.

Lee 李小龍 in the early 1970s. However, for nearly two decades afterwards virtually no films about Chinese themes obtained a comparable level of investment or attention until the breakout of the romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* (摘金奇缘, 2018) and *The Farewell*.

In China, there was an ingrained prejudice against towards Chinese filmmaking that occurred outside the nation's borders. Chinese diasporic films and filmmakers were dismissed as "Westernized" or "Americanized." That neglect extends even to major academic discussions of Chinese cinema. Published in 2002, for instance, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* did not even include such founding figures of ethnic Chinese cinema as Wayne Wang, even though he grew up in Hong Kong and consistently collaborated with Hong Kong filmmakers. Other recent publications on Chinese film history, such as *History of Chinese Film* (2006) edited by Li Shaobai, Ding Yaping's *General History of Chinese Film* (2016) and *History of Contemporary Chinese Film Art* (2017), also only include films and filmmakers identified with mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and entirely neglect transnational and diasporic Chinese filmmaking.[15] Ang Lee was perhaps one of the few ethnic-Chinese directors who have received attention from scholars of Chinese film studies.[16] Because of his unmatched success and reputation, many mainland China-based researchers include his films under the category "Chinese Film in the West."[17] However, most films and filmmaking occurred outside the national boundary of mainland China, and this

[15] Li Shaobai 李少白, Zhongguo dianyingshi 中國電影史[History of Chinese Film] (Beijing, Gaodeng Jiaoyu chubansha, 2006); Ding Yaping 丁亞平, Zhongguo dianying tongshi 中國電影通史 [General History of Chinese Film](Beijing, Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2016) and Zhongguo dangdai dianying yishushi 1949-2017 中國當代電影藝術史 1949-2017 [History of Contemporary Chinese Film Art:1949-2017] (Beijing, Wenhuayishu chubanshe, 2017),

[16] Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014); Kin-Yan Szeto, *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

[17] Zhiwei Xiao and Yingjin Zhang, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 66.

has made Hong Kong and Taiwan invisible under the nation-centered narrative of Chinese film history.

Lulu Wang, Wayne Wang and Ang Lee are the contemporary transnational Chinese-language filmmakers from the 1980s to contemporary times who Whitney Crothers Dilley calls "postmodern," "post-boundaried" and "postnational" artists for they have "crossed and blurred the boundaries not only of the Chinese diaspora… but of the cultures of East and West."[18] However, in Chinese film's early stage, many film practitioners had already made Chinese films with transnational connections. Filmmakers in China went to countries like the United States, Japan and Malay to produce Chinese films. They cooperated with local film circles and overseas Chinese communities to find necessary capital, technical and personnel resources. These early films, which often took up themes from Chinese opera and the experiences of the Chinese diaspora, maintained the connections among the global Chinese diaspora. Although the filmmakers and their films surpassed boundaries of nationality, ideology, culture and language, they often faced the dilemma of being "foreign" in and out of China. What's more, they were forced to migrate and transfer their work elsewhere because transnational filmmaking was vulnerable to social and political unrest both at home and abroad.

To depict a more complete landscape of the history of transnational Chinese cinema, this dissertation rewinds the clock to the early stages of Chinese cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s when flows of information, ideas, talents, technologies between China and other countries were vibrant. I especially focus on film practitioners who were migrants and whose filmmaking took them across borders. Their seemingly peripheral identity enables us to observe filmmaking exchanges not only *between* nation-states and cultures, but also *within* the nation-state. Instead of

[18] Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee*, 21.

narrating Chinese cinema as a monolithic national cinema, this study explores new relationships between Chinese filmmakers, traditional stage culture, language differences, Chinese ethnicity and politics through a transnational and diasporic lens. My research questions are: how to situate films that were made in foreign or transnational environments? What makes a film "foreign"? What makes a film "Chinese"? Does the term, "Chinese cinema" refer to the birthplace of the films, the ethnicity of the filmmakers or the topic of the films relating to China and the Chinese? Are films with Chinese themes, but made in foreign countries and by a multiracial crew, considered Chinese films? In the early era, how should we recognize the filmmakers who had cross-border experiences in Chinese-language filmmaking? How did their transnational experiences affect their film productions? Even though it cannot answer all these fundamental questions in a comprehensive manner, this dissertation aims to exhibit an alternative Chinese cinema that existed in cross-border, multidirectional exchanges.

I argue that the history of Chinese cinema was transnational before it became national. Earlier than the founding of the People's Republic of China, the intensive and continuous transnational movement and creativity had shaped and transformed Chinese filmmaking into a distinctive diasporic cinema across the world. To borrow Yiman Wang's words, "If Chinese cinema has been transnational from the beginning, it has also always been diasporic."[19] In addition, the historical trajectory of diasporic Chinese filmmaking epitomizes the general development of ethnic diasporic cinemas and reflects the constant tension between transnational cultural production and national identity formation in China and beyond.

1. The Concepts related to Chinese Cinema and Chinese Diaspora

[19] Yiman Wang, "Alter-centering Chinese Cinema: The Diasporic Formation," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 538.

To have a better understanding of the theoretical frame of this study, it is necessary to introduce the debates and the disputes concerning Chinese film studies. This study is built upon a growing body of scholarship that has redefined previous definitions of Chinese film and cinema by proposing new terminologies and explanations. Ethnic, political and territorial concerns have always caused disputes and debates around the concept of Chinese cinema. In recent years, scholars of Chinese film have sought new terms to describe the nature of their studies, ranging from "Chinese cinema(s)" and "transnational Chinese cinemas" to "Chinese-language film" and "Sinophone cinemas." These various labels reflect the concerns of Chinese cinema in relation to politics, territories, culture, and linguistics.

A quick glance over the six configurations of the concept of Chinese cinema proposed by Song Hwee Lim helps us to outline the contours of the developing field of Chinese film studies:

1. Chinese cinema(s). mainly focusing on Mainland China, both before and after the founding of the PRC in 1949, but often including discussions of films from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora;
2. Taiwan cinema, including the colonial period ruled by Japan (1895-1945);
3. Hong Kong cinema, both before and after the handover of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997;
4. Transnational Chinese cinemas and Chinese-language cinemas, which encompass all the above;
5. Diasporic cinema, spreading from South-East Asia and Australia to Europe and North America;
6. Sinophone cinema that includes all film production outside of China.[20]

There are other terminologies and alternate schemes in the chaotic disputes about defining Chinese cinema, such as Huallywood (a Chinese take on Hollywood, with *hua* 華 being the pinyin romanization of "Chinese"), accented cinema (films that reflect the filmmaker's identity as an exile or migrant) and minor cinema (a low-budget cinema with limited production values and an inferior

[20] Song Hwee Lim, "Six Chinese Cinemas in Search of a Historiography," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, eds. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (London: British Film Institute, 2011), 35-43.

cultural and critical status).[21] However, the most discussed and functional definitions center around territory, linguistics, diaspora and Sinophone.

1.1 China-centric Cinema: Territorial and Linguistic

Instead of using the singular "Chinese cinema," Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar advocate the plural form – "Chinese cinemas" – to emphasize the distinctive developments of filmmaking in the different political regimes and communities in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora.[22] *The Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, inaugurated in the United Kingdom in 2007, is a periodical devoted exclusively to Chinese film which has emerged from all parts of the Chinese-speaking world, and to the increasing number of related border-crossing collaborative efforts.[23]

Retaining the plural form and avoiding a nation state-centered bias, Sheldon H. Lu has proposed the concept of "transnational Chinese cinemas" to foreground transnationalism as a new framework that goes beyond national cinemas, and the impact on subsequent scholarship has been enormous.[24] Scholars have different interpretations and explorations to the transnational paradigm,

[21] For discussions on "Huallywood," see Shao Peiren, "A New Horizon of Huallywood Cinema Studies: Preface to Huallywood Cinema Studies Book Series," *China Media Report Overseas* 11, no.3 (2015): 1-4; David H. Fleming and Maria Elena Indelicato, "Introduction: On Transnational Chinese Cinema(s), Hegemony and Huallywood(s)," *Transnational Screens* 10, no. 3 (2019): 137–147. For discussions on "accented Chinse cinema," see Flannery Wilson, *New Taiwanese Cinema in Focus: Moving Within and Beyond the Frame* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 76-77; Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, Gina Marchetti and See Kam Tan, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 116-123. For "minor Chinese cinema", see Lim, "Six Chinese Cinemas in Search of a Historiography," 35-43.

[22] Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Nick Brown, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[23] The editorial board consists of leading anglophone Chinese film studies scholars, such as Audrey Yue, Chris Berry, Rey Chow, Song Hwee Lim, Sheldon H. Lu, Gina Marchetti, Laikwan Pang, Paul Pickowicz, Shu-mei Shih, Julian Ward, Yingjin Zhang and Zhang Zhen.

[24] Sheldon H. Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). See also Chris Berry, "Transnational Chinese Cinema Studies," in *The Chinese Cinema Book* eds. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (London: British Film Institute, 2011); Yingjin Zhang, "National Cinema as Translocal Practice: Reflections on Chinese Film in Historiography," in *The Chinese Cinema Book* eds. Lim and Ward (2011); Han Yanli 韓燕麗, Nashonaru shinema no achiranete: Chūgokukei iminn no eiga to nashonaru aidenntiti ナショナル・シネマの彼方にて―中国系移民の映画とナショナル・アイデンティティ[Beyond

providing a comprehensive and loose methodology for Chinese film studies. For example, Yingjin Zhang argues that the transnational is not merely a two-way traffic from one nation to another, but can also be translocal and polylocal, subnational and supranational.[25] In this sense, "China" becomes a porous entity and transnational Chinese cinema is "inescapably national and inadvertently nation-less."[26]

In the early 1990s, Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh Yeh proposed "Chinese-language film," a more inclusive term to cover "all the local, national, regional, transnational, diasporic, and global cinemas relating to Chinese language."[27] The usage of "Chinese-language film" underscores the "Chinese" ethnic and linguistic traits in filmmaking activities that are in multiple geographic sites.[28] Hong Kong and Taiwan-based scholars first enthusiastically used the concept in the united front of the Greater China (which normally encompasses mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) film studies. Later mainland-based scholars also adopted it to embrace cinemas on the borderlands of Greater China. From the 1990s, influential Chinese film festivals acquiesced in using "Chinese-language film" in inviting, accepting and awarding films from the above-mentioned areas and regions.[29]

National Cinema: Overseas Chinese Cinema and National Identity] (Kyoto: Koyo Shobo, 2014).

[25] According to Yingjin Zhang, transnationalism is juxtaposed with translocality, both of which designate not just the mobility of people but also the circulation of capital, ideas and images, goods and styles, services, diseases, technologies, and modes of communication. For further discussion, see Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

[26] Song Hwee Lim, "Concepts of Transnational Cinema Revisited," *Transnational Screens* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1.

[27] Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, introduction to *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, eds. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 2.

[28] Sheldon H. Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, eds., *Chinese-language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

[29] In 2018's Golden Horse Award in Taiwan, which is one of biggest film festivals in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, the Taiwanese director Fu Yue, who won the best documentary award, said in her acceptance speech that she hoped Taiwan would be recognized as "independent nation." Her words sparked strong opposition from mainland Chinese participants and later the PRC government. The next year, the China Film Administration of the PRC suspended films and personnel from participating in the festival.

However, the concept of Chinese-language cinema cannot solve all problems, and indeed has created considerable controversy. "Chinese language" is not an all-compassing and unified term that can explain all the differences in linguistics. In China, let alone the larger Chinese diaspora, films span a range of different dialects and accents which indicate distinctive regional and cultural differences, such as "Cantonese cinema" (*yueyu pian* 粵語片), "Mandarin cinema" (*guoyu pian* 国語片), and "Taiwanese-dialect cinema" (*taiyu pian* 台語片). An emphasis on "Chinese-language cinema" is, as Song Hwee Lim puts it, "a different kind of essentialism."[30] In addition, the usage of the term "Chinese-language film" has the possibility of overlooking films about or by minority Chinese that use minority languages. For instance, films in the Tibetan language such as *The Horse Thief* (*Daomazei* 盜馬賊, 1986) and *Jinpa* (*Zhuangsile yizhiyang* 撞死了壹只羊, 2019) have not often been classified as "Chinese-language" films. Finally, a linguistic-centric approach makes it hard to categorize films made in the diaspora that may use more than one language. For example, Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* is a bilingual film made in both English and Chinese (with a strong northeastern accent), as well as scenes with Japanese dialogue. A linguistic approach would have no place, then, for *The Farewell* and similar films.

Therefore, as Yingjin Zhang implies, there is no substantial difference in Chinese cinema(s) and Chinese-language cinema because the former covers the latter, as well as films with mixed Chinese and other languages.[31] Meanwhile, the notion of Chinese-language cinema reinstates the linguistic hierarchy that was prevalent in the past and in contemporary Chinese film productions. Thus, the configurations of Chinese cinema under traditional territorial and linguistic orientations

[30] Lim, *The Chinese Cinema Book*, 39.
[31] Zhang, introduction to *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, 3.

could lead to a "China-centered" or "Han/Mandarin-centered" preoccupation, thereby neglecting non-Han/Mandarin films and films that rupture national borderlines or are on the perceived periphery. To solve this problem, many scholars adopt a non-China-centric approach that situates films outside the paradigm of the Chinese national state.

1.2 Non-China: Sinophone

In 2004, the Taiwanese scholar Shu-mei Shih applied the Sinophone theory to vision studies. Abandoning Sinaphone's original meaning of "Chinese-language," she uses "Sinophone" to refer to "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries."[32] In other words, Shih excludes "China" from the discussion and focuses on "non-China": Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diasporas. It is understandable that her aim is to contest China-centrism and to deconstruct the essentializing notions of "China" and "Chineseness." However, this approach is problematic, because it falls into another binary, concealing the links between "in" China and "outside" China.

Therefore, many scholars redefine "Sinophone" to include China into the discussion. For example, Lingchei Letty Chen uses "Sinophone sphere" to encompass all people of Chinese descent who reside in various parts of the world and who have adopted their chosen foreign land as home for themselves and their offspring.[33] *Sinophone Cinemas,* co-edited by Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, investigates "new" sites such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Britain and Australia "that are not easily contained either by diaspora studies or any other model that implies China as the

[32] Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). See also Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, eds., *Sinophone Cinemas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[33] Lingchei Letty Chen, "When does 'diaspora' end and 'Sinophone' begin?" *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no.1 (2015): 52.

centre."[34] Against nation-oriented paradigm, "Sinophone" is the most clear-cut approach to extricate scholars from the nation-centric bias. However, it easily falls into another non-China-centric bias and becomes unsound theoretically and pragmatically. Moreover, different scholars use "Sinophone," but mean many different things, making it less effective as a methodology.

1.3 Ethnic-centric: Diasporic Cinema

Witnessing the problems applying the term Sinophone, others turn to diaspora theory, which predates the former, scholars have adopted the concept of "diasporic cinema" for decades in response to the boom in migration studies and the growth of diaspora and postcolonial studies.[35] It "primarily refer to films created as a result of the filmmakers' migrant or diasporic experience and conditions, as well as to films which embody subjects, themes and stories centering on migration, diaspora and multiculturalism."[36] Diaspora is generally defined as a group of people or community living in a place other than their homeland or native country.[37] The concept of diaspora, as Olivia Khoo noted, "has been viewed as a useful and productive notion in thinking beyond nationality and race, and as offering an alternative to that of the bounded nation-state."[38] It particularly helps to identify filmmaking within a specific race and ethnic group. For example, Sheila Petty has discussed the cultural representation and the complex identity in a selection of African diasporic films to illustrate the diversity of global Black diasporic experiences.[39] It also

[34] Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, *Sinophone Cinemas*, eds., Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), viii.
[35] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Eva Rueschmann, ed., *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003); Jakub Kazecki, Karen A. Ritzenhoff, and Cynthia J. Miller, eds., *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).
[36] Arezou Zalipour, *Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking in New Zealand* (New York: Springer, 2019), 7.
[37] For detailed discussions, see Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge,1996); Jana Evans Brazie and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
[38] Olivia Khoo, *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 15.
[39] Sheila Petty, *Contact Zones: Memory, Origin, and Discourses in Black Diasporic Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State

pays attention to exiled experience of people from one country to another. Hamid Naficy, in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, demonstrates how the exile or diaspora in the west translates their personal experiences (primarily from under-developed countries and regions) into cinema in contemporary times.[40] Arezou Zalipour has examined diasporic productions in New Zealand and the contemporary social, political, and cultural conditions in which films and filmmakers have emerged and evolved across the globe.[41]

In terms of Chinese diasporic cinema, there is a proliferation of studies from different perspectives. Some specifically focus on film representations of the overseas Chinese families and life. Some studies focus on film genres specific to Chinese cinematic culture (such as martial art films) and film icons and companies that have sweeping influence in the global pan-Chinese communities from the 1970s to the present (such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan). In *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*, Kin-Yan Szeto examines the three well-known filmmakers' connections to the martial arts cinema, underlining their migration and engagements between the east and the west.[42] Edited by Poshek Fu, *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* discusses the mega Hong Kong-based film studio The Shaw Brothers and its transnational influence in Chinese diaspora and other ethnic communities.[43]

One of the few scholars to attempt a more comprehensive account of Chinese diasporic cinema has been Gina Marchetti. She defines the Chinese diaspora as "the Chinese experience of

University Press, 2008).

[40] Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*. Naficy coins the term "accented Cinema" to refer to filmmaking by the displaced and by filmmakers from under-developed countries living in the west that take up themes of exiles, diaspora and ethnicity.

[41] Zalipour, *Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking in New Zealand.*

[42] Szeto, *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora*.

[43] Poshek Fu, ed., *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

dislocation, relocation, emigration, immigration, cultural hybridity, migrancy, exile, and nomadism." [44] Focusing on the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality on international screens, her book *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997* examines a wide range of transnational films co-produced in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore and the momentous political and social events the contemporary filmmakers were confronting. It expands the geopolitical notion of mainland China by introducing non-Chinese directors such as Eric Khoo from Singapore. Another of Marchetti's books, *The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema*, examines how Chinese identity is presented in a multitude of media forms in the United States and shows how national, political, social and sexual identities are represented in the Chinese diaspora.[45]

Marchetti's interdisciplinary studies demonstrates a nuanced connection between the diasporic and transnational approaches. There are obvious overlaps between the two theoretical approaches in terms of the specific topics (such as immigrants and international Chinese stars), identity and border-crossing practices. Her studies are, as Ramona Curry suggested, "an integrated overview of transnational and diasporic cinema studies as a conjoined research field that has emerged in conjunction with broader intellectual shifts from unitary to more multivocal, de-centered perspectives…."[46]

Therefore, in this study I employ a combination of transnational and diasporic paradigms as the theoretical framework to discover transnational filmmaking that cut across gender, race,

[44] Gina Marchetti, "Chinese and Chinese Diaspora Cinema: Introduction: Plural and Transnational," *Jump Cut* 42 (1998): 70.
[45] Gina Marchetti, *The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).
[46] Ramona Curry, "Introduction," *Transnational and Diasporic Cinema*, accessed on July 10, 2020. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0243.xml.

nationality, and ethnicity, as well as across boundaries of national cinemas, genres, and authorship. A joint perspective of both transnational and diasporic perspective is best suited to this study because it integrates both the cross-border mobility of individual filmmakers at the center of the transnational filmmaking, and the complications of their ethnic identity. As transnational filmmakers, they were migrating and staying temporarily in multiple places around the world. They set up film companies in New York, San Francisco and Singapore, transferred the companies to Hong Kong and Shanghai, and sustained Chinese cinema by transnational financial and personnel resources even during severe political crises (such as the Sino-Japanese War and the Cold War). Meanwhile, living amidst complex social and global environments, they used filmmaking to explore questions of ethnic self-esteem, national identity, multilingualism, and cultural and intercultural awareness.

Defined by attributes of gender, race, political outlook and cultural orientation, transnational filmmakers were considered "outsiders" in their lives and careers. They resolved the tension and anxiety of being "outsiders" and "foreign" in different filmmaking sites by making use of this distance and difference. Not fully integrated and assimilated, they could "attain a degree of freedom that allow[ed] them to deviate from the norms."[47] Thus, they were more liberated in terms of both physical mobility and artistic creativity, because they were unbound by conventional commitments and indigenousness. As a result, their films were always innovative in theme, technical devices and production mode. In this sense, transnational filmmakers are less known but no less important in the history of the Chinese film industry.

2. Overview of the Chapters

[47] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 58.

The dissertation consists of three chapters which present groups of Chinese diasporic filmmakers and their transnational cinematic experiences in different historical conjunctions from the 1930s to 1950s. It is important to note that most studies concerning transnational and diasporic Chinese cinema examined contemporary phenomenon (approximately from the late 1970s to now) and only a few studies examine early diasporic Chinese filmmakers. To show a more complete lineage of the history of the transnational Chinese cinema, I look at the early periods of its development and especially pay attention to three critical historical events/moments when the industrial and social conditions of transnational filmmaking had changed dramatically. They are the advent of sound pictures, the outbreak of the second World War and the start of the Cold War.

Chapter One examines the critical interactions between Chinese opera and early Chinese filmmaking in the early 1930s. Before the coming of film, opera was in the position of supremacy over other public entertainment means. It greatly influenced the earliest filmmaking in China by providing space/venue (teahouse and theaters), sources (music, scripts, performers) and audience. When sound technologies were developed in filmmaking in the 1930s, Chinese filmmakers kept mining opera plays and singers as the first "voice" of Chinese talkies. In this chapter, I will illustrate how the filmmakers, who often inspired by the classic opera repertoires, made the earliest Chinese sound films in different localities in and out of China. The pioneer filmmakers included opera masters Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian, Chinese film distributer Kwan Man-ching and Chinese American director Joseph Sunn Jue. In doing so, I present a transnational Chinese opera culture which surpassed the national borderlines and functioned a solid and diverse mass basis of transnational Chinese filmmaking. This early transnational filmmaking, I argue, represented an alternative Chinese cinema which based upon transnational Chinese diasporas and contributed to the internalization and localization of motion picture in China.

Chapter Two centers on the early Chinese transnational cinema in diasporic communities by re-discovering the Chinese American director and producer Esther Eng and her transnational filmmaking in San Francisco and Hong Kong during the Second World War. Raised in San Francisco's Chinatown, the mixed cultural environment containing Cantonese opera and Hollywood films influenced Eng's career as a trans-cultural film director. The wartime patriotism among Chinese people and overseas Chinese impelled her to go back and forth between the U.S. and China to make films for Chinese audience in both countries. She represented a group of diasporic filmmakers who were "outsiders" in the norm of Chinese film industry but contributed to the development of Chinese cinema. By making and distributing films cross the Pacific, Esther Eng shortened the distance between the sojourned overseas Chinese and their countrymen in China. What's more, Eng's transnational filmmaking demonstrated the constantly changing geopolitical contours for Chinese filmmaking during wartime. In the end, her film career was subject to the vicissitudes of the post-war environment in Hong Kong film industry.

Chapter Three examines the cinematic connection between Hong Kong cinema and Southeast Asian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. After 1949, Hong Kong cinematic field became an ideological battlefield between the Chinese communists and Taiwan-based nationalists, as well as larger Cold War conflicts. The local film market cannot sustain the industry when the CCP-led China closed its door to film importation and Taiwan was much lesser receptive to Cantonese-speaking films. Therefore, the huge market in Southeast Asia among Cantonese-speaking migration population became the lifeline of Hong Kong cinema. By introducing Kong Ngee, a Singapore-based film company and its production branch in Hong Kong, this chapter reveals how Cold War factors and transnational Chinese diasporic audiences affected the production,

distribution and reception of Chinese-language (especially Cantonese-speaking) films in Hong Kong and Singapore.

In sum, this dissertation examines the history of Chinese cinema in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s in a transnational perspective, and argues that Chinese cinema was, from the very beginning, the product of transnational movements of capital, people and ideas among the Chinese diaspora. The common experiences among those in the diaspora and the global links among various Chinese communities initiated and sustained the development of Chinese cinema. Cross-border filmmaking and individual filmmakers (both Chinese and overseas Chinese), traditional culture (including Chinese opera), diverse languages and dialects, and a massive diasporic audience that covered much of the world all together defined and sustained Chinese filmmaking as a cultural production that was fundamentally transnational.

Chapter 1

When Opera Meets Film: Early Chinese Sound Filmmaking in A Transnational Perspective[48]

Introduction

In April 1930, a Hong Kong newspaper report titled "A Domestic Film is Coming Up to Town" heralded a promising screening of a new sound Chinese film in local theaters.[49] Luo Mingyou 羅明佑 (Lo Ming-yau, Lao Ming-yau, 1900-1967), a Hong Kong entrepreneur and the manager of a movie theater-chain in northern China announced that he was setting up his own film production company to produce films "to resist the invasion of foreign films" and "to promote [the] domestic film industry."[50] The first film was a sound picture called *Spring Dream of the Ancient Capital* (*Gudu chunmeng* 故都春夢, 1930).[51] Luo especially revealed a special guest actor in this film: "Our country's great opera master Mei Lanfang will join in the film and perform *Yuji Swordplay* in a scene.[52] When he returns from the United States, he will instantly start his shooting in this sound picture."

[48] The Chinese theater and opera consists of two categories, xiqu 戲曲 and xiju 戲劇. The former is traditional and operatic; the latter is modern and like dramas of the West. In this study, I use "opera" to refer to the former category, the traditional stage performance.

[49] "Guochan pian jiangdao Gang"國産片将到港[A Domestic Film is Coming Up to Town]. Huazi Ri Bao 華字日報, April 25, 1930.

[50] Ibid.

[51] For film titles, I have used the English titles in general circulation and included both a pinyin romanization and characters of the Mandarin for its first appearance, e.g., *Romance of the Songsters* (Gelü qingchao 歌侶情潮, 1933). Afterwards, I use only the English titles. For names of Chinese people, film companies and places, I have used the pinyin romanization and with some exceptions whenever there are common usages and the pinyin romanizations are unfamiliar to the public, e.g., Kwan Man-ching rather than Guan Wenqing.

[52] *Yuji Swordplay* 虞姬舞劍 is the highlight piece of Peking opera *Farewell My Concubine*, first presented in 1921 and then became one of the representative works of Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961).

In the end, Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961) did not join Luo's filmmaking. When he came back to China in July 1930, *The Dream of the Ancient Capital* had finished production, and it premiered in Shanghai the following month. It turned out to be a silent picture that contained old film shorts Mei Lanfang had made in the 1920s. However, the film's promotion relied heavily on Mei Lanfang's guest appearance. In 1932, *The Dream of the Ancient Capital* was shown in Taiwan, a local newspaper advertised the film as "starring the famous Mei Lanfang, this film is of truly artistic value and is a must-see."[53] In 1933, Luo Mingyou, then the manager of China's biggest film company Lianhua Productions 聯華影業公司 (United China Film Company), sent his employee Kwan Man-ching 關文清 (Guan Wenqing, Moon Kwan, 1896–1995) to America to promote Lianhua's films including *The Dream of the Ancient Capital* and other Chinese films.[54] Kwan's American tour appealed to not only diasporic audiences in Chinatowns across the United States, but also to young overseas Chinese such as Joseph Sunn Jue 趙樹燊 (Zhao Shushen, 1904-1990) who ventured into Chinese filmmaking.

The promotion and screening of *The Dream of the Ancient Capital* shows how the ambitious filmmaker Luo Mingyou manipulated the ideas of the nationalism, the novelty of sound technology and a Peking opera star into filmmaking and publicity to attract Chinese audience in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. Luo followed a film production pattern which was popular in the 1920s, that is, mining traditional Chinese operas for stories, stars and music. More importantly, he stepped forward in initiating sound film in China (though ultimately it was not successful) and

[53] Tainan Xinbao 台南新報, January 9, 1932, quoted in Xu Yaxiang 徐亞湘, *Shishi yu quanshi: Rizhishiqi Taiwan baokanxiqu ziliao xuandu* 史實與詮釋: 日治時期台灣報刊戲曲資料選讀 [Historical Facts and Interpretation: Selected Readings of Opera Materials in Taiwan Newspapers during Japanese Occupation Era] (Taiwan: Guoli chuantong yishu zhongxin, 2009), 408.

[54] Lianhua is one of the dominant film production companies in China in the 1930s. Originally set up in Hong Kong in 1930 by Luo Mingyou (Law Ming-yau) and Li Minwei 黎民偉 (Lai Man-Wai, 1893-1953)), it transferred to Shanghai the next year.

distributing Chinese film to a transnational range of Chinese audiences. Therefore, the making of *Spring Dream of the Ancient Capital* and its subsequent influence on overseas Chinese audiences gives us a glimpse into how during the early 1930s both sound technology and diasporic Chinese theater culture jointly influenced the development of Chinese transnational cinema.

Before the invention of motion pictures, opera performances were the most popular public entertainment for the Chinese at home and abroad. Going to enjoy a traditional opera performance was described as ***ting*** *xi*, which means "to **listen** to an opera play." This emphasized the important aural aspects of the theater, including music, talk and singing. These involved both the performers as well as the audience.[55] Therefore, Chinese opera films in the silent era lacked most of their stage charm. Sound films, on the contrary, inherited and carried forward those important elements of traditional Chinese drama in both visual and auditory sense.

As "China" itself was unquestionably of diverse musical forms and languages and dialects, the sound ear added even more complexity to early Chinese cinema. With different background and initiatives, filmmakers and companies vied to make the first sound pictures in China. Like Luo Mingyou, they believed that by integrating Chinese music, songs and language, they could make "authentic" Chinese films and compete with the dominant foreign films (chiefly American).

By focusing on the earliest Chinese sound filmmaking in different localities in and out of China, I show how "Chinese cinema" in the 1930s was deeply interrelated with Chinese opera and opera audiences in a transnational and diasporic context. I reveal that the relationship between Chinese opera and cinema grew deeper in the 1930s when sound technology allowed filmmakers to better transform the linguistic and musical elements of the opera into their filmmaking. I

[55] As an art form, Chinese opera includes many elements: music, dance, acting, mime, comedy, tragedy, acrobatics and martial arts. An aspiring opera performer has to learn to sing, talk, act and fight 唱念做打 from childhood.

especially inspect two major genres of Chinese opera: Peking opera 京劇 and Cantonese opera 粵劇 and their influences on early sound filmmaking. By doing so, I argue that 1930s Chinese cinema witnessed a dynamic regional and transnational flow of talent, technologies and ideas between Shanghai, Hong Kong, North America and Southeast Asia. The earliest history of Chinese talkies witnessed adaptations between stage and screen and also signified the beginning of the distinct development of Cantonese-language cinema, which had a vast potential audience in the global diasporic Chinese communities.

This chapter consists of three sections. Firstly, it examines Mei Lanfang and his transnational sound filmmaking experiences in Shanghai, the United States and Japan. Utilizing his operatic charisma, Mei Lanfang not only introduced Peking opera to audiences around the globe, but also attracted big transnational screen audiences to Chinese sound films. Then the chapter looks at another opera master, Xue Juexian, in southern China. Compared to Mei Lanfang who only acted in filmmaking and used film as a medium to record and disseminate Peking Opera, Xue Juexian was more versatile and innovated in the earliest sound filmmaking activities. As an actor, a writer and a director, he did not just make documentaries about the opera with sound, but actually remade and adapted opera into films with both Chinese and Western dramatic and music elements. Cantonese language films, owing to the advent of talkies and to innovations like Xue's, formed a distinct path of development with its own linguistic and cultural features, Thirdly, this chapter traces the story of an early Chinese sound film made in America titled *Romance of the Songsters* (*Gelü qingchao* 歌侶情潮, 1933). Accomplished with foreign filmmakers' engagement and technical assistance, the film's producers, Kwan Man-ching and Chinese American Joseph Sunn Jue, utilized Cantonese opera stars to tell a Chinese story that took place in the United States. In sum, the emergence of sound film in the 1930s provided a chance for Chinese cinema to develop

in a more musically and linguistically hybrid way. During this time, the Cantonese film industry began to expand rapidly. Meanwhile, the role of Chinese diasporic communities as a vast market became more and more prominent.

1.1 "Never Heard Mr. Mei Singing in a Movie!": Mei Lanfang and the Earliest Chinese Sound Films

1.1.1 The Opera/Film Encounter

Before the arrival of motion pictures, opera was the most popular entertainment and artistic style in China. The convention of Chinese opera is "a blend of song, speech, mime, dance, and acrobatics, held together by theatrical conventions resting on a concept of drama quite different from the realism and naturalism that have had such influence in the West."[56] Although musical styles and stories vary among the various regional Chinese operas, many conventions are nevertheless broadly shared. The performers use accepted and familiar routines to demonstrate the storyline and a characters' emotions, such as make-up, costumes and stylized gestures and movements. The audience used these conventions to interpret a performance and to judge the performers' craft. As Peter Lovrick and Wang-Ngai Siu noted, the audience comes to the theater "to enjoy the execution of a particular aria, acrobatic scene, or much-loved part of a story… [and] people would come into a teahouse or theatre in the middle of a performance and chat or eat, waiting for favorite spots."[57] Sitting in teahouses and traditional theaters, Chinese opera-goers know the stories well before they begin and worship the excellence and charisma of the opera performers.

[56] Peter Lovrick and Wang-Ngai Siu, *Chinese Opera: Images and Stories* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 3.
[57] Lovrick and Siu, *Chinese Opera*, 4.

The scenario of traditional live theater culture was complicated when new media and technologies like newspaper, photography, radio, gramophones, and film together took root in China during the mid-Republican era. Although facing great challenges, traditional opera benefitted from the advent of the new media in important ways. For example, Wing Chung Ng has pointed that the first Chinese gramophone records featured opera singers and actors. As modern consumable items, the gramophone records, either by individual purchase or via radio broadcasting, aided in exposing a larger audience to opera music, its lyrics, and its varying arias in novel settings.[58] In return, film gained its foothold in China because of its intimacy with the opera singers and audience. When motion pictures were introduced in China in the late nineteenth century, teahouses and traditional opera theaters accommodated the earliest motion picture screenings and operagoers became the first audience to enjoy the new visual novelty. Naturally, famous opera performers, arias and opera stories also became the subjects of the earliest Chinese films.

The opera/film encounter in China gave birth to a number of opera films. At the very beginning, opera films were basically short opera documentaries or newsreel clips. For example, the first Chinese film *Dingjun Mountain* (*Dingjun shan* 定軍山, 1905) was a documentary of a namesake Peking opera aria, performed by the famous *laosheng* 老生 actor (the middle-aged mandarin official or scholar) Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847-1917). Later opera films also refer to the film adaptations or appropriations of opera. Using opera arias as script, filmmakers incorporated modern drama and Hollywood film elements into the filmmaking. For instance, Hong Kong's first film *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (*Zhuangzi shiqi*, 莊子試妻, 1913), was an adaptation of the

[58] Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 67.

Cantonese traditional opera *Zhuang Zhou Dreams the Butterfly* 蝴蝶夢, with a modern setting and costume. No matter in which form, at the center of the opera films were the opera stars.

When sound technology was invented in the late 1920s, music, song and language became the most important facets in the new mode of production. Opera performers on the screen became more attractive. With years of professional training, they were good at singing songs and narrating lines. More importantly, unlike film actors and actresses, opera singers like Mei Lanfang had become famous before entering the film industry and had a stable and huge fan basis across the country. The advent of sound only boosted their reputation and popularity. Ironically, sound filmmaking destroyed the careers of many film actors and actresses because of the language barrier. For example, many Cantonese actors and actresses who were active in Shanghai's silent pictures, such as the legendary Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910-1935), lost their fame because they had great difficulty in speaking Mandarin in films that catered to northern audiences. Unlike the ordinary actors and actresses whose life and career were confined in the film studios, moreover, opera performers had more opportunities for contact with a wider world. The opera troupes frequently toured around the nation and even went abroad. To some degree, opera performers were the contact zone not only between film and opera, but also between China and the outside world. In the early stage of Chinese film industry, Mei Lanfang was unquestionably the best example to show this nexus.

1.1.2 Mei Lanfang's Filmmaking in the Silent Era

Mei Lanfang began to take part in filmmaking in 1920 when most people was still considered film a new, "foreign thing" that could not be compared to the opera. From the very beginning of his filmmaking experiences, Mei Lanfang boldly explored how to exhibit and express the beauty of opera on the big screen. Born into a leading Peking opera family in 1894, Mei

acquired a basic grasp of singing and dancing skills from his childhood and in 1904 made his stage debut as a *nandan* 男旦 performer (male actor of female roles) in Beijing at the age of eleven.[59] In his early twenties, Mei gained a national reputation for his excellence in playing female roles and for innovating traditional arias.[60] In the 1910s and 1920s, collaborating with the dramatist Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1877-1962) who had recently returned from France, Mei created a dozen new plays with contemporary themes and modern costumes. He also refreshed Peking opera by reviving and absorbing *Kunqu* 昆曲 (or *Kunju* 昆劇, Kun opera)[61], one of the earliest Chinese theatrical forms. His unique singing, style and arias established a special genre in Peking opera, the "Mei School 梅派."[62] With a series of innovations in arias, singing and styles, he upgraded the art of Peking opera to a higher level and strengthened Peking opera's leading status amongst numerous genres of Chinese operas.

In 1920, when Mei's opera troupe toured in Shanghai, he cooperated with the Commercial Press to make his earliest films.[63] The two arias Mei intended to make into a film version were

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[59] *Nandan* refers to male actors who play female roles. *Dan* 旦 is the general name for female roles in Chinese opera, often referring to leading roles. They may be played by either male actors or actresses. In the early years of Peking opera, all *dan* roles were played by men because women performing on stage was considered detrimental to public morality. There are different kinds of *dan* such as *Guimen dan* 閨門旦 (mature and often married women), *Hua dan* 花旦 (lively young females), *Daoma dan* 刀馬旦(female warriors), *Wu dan* 武旦 (fighting women with all kinds of weapons), *Lao dan* 老旦(older women) and *Cai dan* 彩旦(clownish female roles).

[60] Cross-gendered performance was commonly, though not exclusively, practiced in China well into the mid-twentieth century. Mei Lanfang is most famous for playing the role *Guimen dan*, a kind of *dan* role which refers to normally mature and sometimes married women.

[61] *Kunqu* dominated the Chinese theatrical world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As it became increasingly refined and sophisticated in its dramatic poetry, singing, and acting, its dominance was challenged by the newly rising popular forms such as Peking opera and other regional forms. By the early twentieth century, *kunqu* had been on a continuous and drastic decline and had struggled for its survival.

[62] In Peking opera, there are various performing schools. Actors and actresses with different performing styles are classified into different schools. Besides Mei School, other famous schools are Zhou Xinfang 周信芳(Qi School 麒派), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋(Cheng School 程派), Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓(Yang School 楊派) and Ma Lianliang 馬連良 (Ma School 馬派).

[63] Commercial Press (Shangwu yinshu guan 商務印書館) was a leading Chinese publisher. Building on its success in the publication of educational materials, it set up a film production unit in 1918, aiming at producing films that were "uniquely Chinese" to prevent Hollywood films dominating the domestic market. It mainly produced five

Chunxiang Disturbs the School (Chunxiang naoxue 春香鬧學) and *Heavenly Maidens Spread Flowers* (Tiannü san hua 天女散花). There was no director at the time of filming. The cinematographer fixed the camera in a distance from the actor and the actors arranged the performances themselves. To accommodate the length of the film, Mei selected the most flamboyant part of the arias, reduced the singing parts and enhancing facial and physical expressions to highlight the visual expression in a silent short film. Also, Mei and the filmmakers shot in settings and locations that were closer to reality than conventional backgrounds. For example, *Chunxiang Disturbs the School* consisted of two scenes. The first scene took place in an ancient study room. Thus, instead of using only a desk and a chair like the original stage props, the filmmakers added more interior props such as furniture and decorations to restore an ancient Chinese house and living environment. The second scene happened in a garden and the crew moved to an authentic private garden in Shanghai to make shots of "chasing a butterfly" and "sitting on a swing."

Due to the limitations of the technology and the lack of experience, the visual effects of the two shorts were bleak and blurry. Nevertheless, Mei was pleased with his first films and regarded them as a good way to preserve and promote his art.[64] Mei Lanfang once said that, "Although these two films are still in the enlightenment period in terms of cinematography, let alone how the performing arts of classical opera can be combined with cinematography, some new explorations on making opera films have been made."[65] In the autumn and winter of 1921, the film was shown

types of films: current affairs or news; landscape; educational films; Chinese opera and comedies, slapsticks, and dramas. In 1926, Commercial Press ended its nine-year film production for decreasing profits.

[64] Qi Rushan 齊如山, *Meilanfang youmeiji* 梅蘭芳遊美記 [Mei Lanfang's American Tour] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1931), 42.

[65] Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, *Wo de dianying shenghuo* 我的電影生活 [My Film Life] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1962), 32.

in Shanghai and Peking, and later in other major cities, where it was well received by audiences. It was later distributed to various ports in the Southeast Asia, and was also very popular with local overseas Chinese.[66]

In the silent era, Mei made several other film shorts at home and abroad. In 1923, an unknown American film company came to Peking and filmed Mei's representative aria *Madame Shangyuan* (*Shangyuan furen* 上元夫人). In 1924, the Father of Hong Kong cinema, Li Minwei 黎民偉 (Lai Man-Wai, 1893–1953), carried a camera from Hong Kong to Peking to film Mei Lanfang. Li and his Hong Kong colleague Luo Mingyou, who took charge of a northern film distribution and exhibition company, set up a studio on the rooftop of Luo's True Light Theatre. Mei Lanfang did a few classical arias of dancing, and Li Minwei arranged the close-ups, medium scenes, distant scenes and panoramic shots to capture the continuous movements of the dancing. Mei said: "We must shoot the scene as if it were broken but still connected, as if it were a seven-piece jigsaw puzzle which could be put together so that it was not fragmented."[67] Mei's idea of "seemingly disconnected but still connected" can be regarded as the earliest aesthetic principle of opera film montage. A few years later, Luo Mingyou and Li Minwei used one of Me's short films -- *Yuji Swordplay* -- in their first sound film of Lianhua, *Spring Dream of the Ancient Capital* (1930).

Shortly after the cooperation with Luo Mingyou and Li Minwei, Mei Lanfang toured Japan with his Peking opera troupe in 1924.[68] In mid-November, during his performance at the Takarazuka Grand Theatre in Takarazuka, Kosaka Film Studio filmed several arias including

[66] Shuk-ting Yau, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 53.
[67] Mei, *Wo de dianying shenghuo*, 45.
[68] It was Mei Lanfang's second visit in Japan. In 1919, invited by Ōkura Kihachirō (1837–1928), a Japanese magnate, Mei toured major cities in Japan. Carefully arranged by politicians, businessman, writers and artists, Mei's first international debut was successful.

Rainbow Pass (Hongni guan 虹霓關) and *Hongxian Stealing the Box* (Hongxian daohe 紅線盜盒).[69] Mei later recalled it as an unforgettable experience. "Japan's way of dealing with lighting and camera was more complicated than in China. We restarted again and again to work with the camera. Sometimes, we did our jobs well, but the calculation of lens length was inaccurate, and our movements were out of the camera. Sometimes, we stopped because of the electricity problem. The language was also a barrier. There were times of misunderstanding between us."[70] The films were instantly screened in theaters in Osaka and Tokyo after the production. Japanese audiences were fascinated by Mei's splendid stage charisma. *Kageki*, a periodical distributed by the Takarazuka Girls' Opera Company, hailed Mei Lanfang "a precious gem" of the Chinese theatre and his art as the crystallization of the quintessence of four thousand years of Chinese tradition. It further claimed that since his 1919 visit to Japan, not only Asia but the entire world has been amazed by Mei's art and has been singing his praise.[71] With a growing transnational reputation, Mei was ready to take one more step forward to meet his audience on a wider international stage. While visiting the United States in 1930, he again cooperated with local filmmakers and made his first sound picture in America.

1.1.3 Hollywood-made Chinese Opera Film

In 1930, sponsored by a group of Chinese and American diplomats, missionaries, and merchants, Mei Lanfang toured America and gave performances in several major cities such as New York, San Francisco, Seattle and Chicago. It was the first time Chinese opera stepped into

[69] Xie Sijin 謝思進 and Sun Lihua 孫利華, *Mei Lanfang yishu nianpu* 梅蘭芳藝術年譜[Chronology of Mei Lanfang's Art] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu, 2009), 129.
[70] Mei Shaowu 梅邵武, *Mei Lanfang quanji* 梅蘭芳全集[Complete works of Mei Lanfang] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu, 2001), 101-102.
[71] Kageki (Opera). 1924. "Mei Lanfang ichiza Takarazuka kōen yokoku"(Announcement for the public performance of Mei Lanfang and his troupe in Takarazuka). *Kageki* 56 (November): 63–64.

the western cultural arena. Mei's splendid impersonation of female roles aroused a sensation in the American press and among critics, celebrities and his audiences. During his stay in America, headline news and reports in American newspapers underlined the exotic appeal of Mei and his art. In reporting the news of Mei's arrival at Los Angeles, *Los Angeles Times* called him "the most colorful and exotic figures of the theater today" and "a good-will ambassador from the Celestial Empire."[72]

Mei's popularity also aroused Hollywood interests. Paramount Film Company sent a crew to New York record Mei's performance. Th result was Mei's first sound film, *Killing the Tiger* (*Slaying the Tiger* 刺虎, 1930). During the filmmaking, the filmmakers spent a lot of time in thinking about the mise-en-scene and placing the microphone. Although it was a newsreel of only a few minutes, the filming process was time-consuming. Before his return to China, this American-made Chinese opera documentary had already been imported and screened in Beijing. The audience was astonished, remarking that "I have never heard Mr. Mei's singing in a movie. And it is made in U.S.? The singing, the dialogue and the movement are all fantastic. What a lively performance!"[73] The showing of *Killing the Tiger* was one year earlier than the birth of China's first sound picture *The Songstress Red Peony* (*Genü Hong mudan* 歌女紅牡丹, 1931), thus making Mei's performance arguably the first Chinese actor in a sound film.

Mei's transnational tour as well as the new medium of film disseminated Mei's reputation not only as a Chinese opera star but also as a transnational icon of Chinese culture. As Teri Silvio

[72] Muriel Babcock, "China's Idol to Be Here," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1930, quoted in Min Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Theatre Placed and Displaced* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 84.
[73] Qin Xiaolin 秦曉琳 and Yang Weiping 楊衛平, "Mei Lanfang dui Zhongguo xiqu dianying de gongxian"梅蘭芳對中國戲曲電影的貢獻 [The Contribution of Mei Lanfang to Chinese Opera Film], *Dianying wenxue* 電影文學 15 (2009): 67.

noted, Mei Lanfang was "a major figure in Republican-era negotiations between China and the West, tradition and modernity, stage and screen."[74] Mei's stage and cinematic life overlapped with each other, and his national and international fame mutually promoted each other, coinciding with the development of Chinese cinema which always occurred in a cross-border context. After returning to China in July 1930, Mei took part in the first Chinese sound film *The Songstress Red Peony* (*Genü Hong mudan* 歌女紅牡丹, 1931).

1.1.4 Dubbing in China's First Talkie

In March 15, 1931, China's first sound-on-disc picture, *The Songstress Red Peony* premiered in Shanghai.[75] It dealt with the life of a female opera singer and made use of four well-known opera arias of Mei Lanfang to form "a play-within-in-a-play" structure. The dialogue and songs in this film were recorded onto wax cylinders in Pathé studio, the biggest gramophone recording company in China. Although the recording quality was far from ideal, the reception of this film was phenomenal. It was the first time for Chinese audience to hear their favorite actors and actresses speaking Mandarin and singing opera on the screen. Although Mei Lanfang's image did not appear in *The Songstress Red Peony*, his singing voice was still the biggest attraction of the film. In Shanghai, the audiences packed the theaters and the release lasted for more than one month. The normal release of a silent film was less than a week. Audiences in overseas markets such as the Philippines and Indonesia paid high prices to purchase the screening rights.[76] The success of

[74] Teri Silvio, "Chinese Opera, Global Cinema, and the Ontology of the Person: Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*," in *Between Opera and Cinema*, eds. Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa (New York: Routledge, 2015), 188.

[75] "Sound-on-disc" is a sound technology, first developed in the early 20th century and became commercially viable in the late 1920s. In this system, music and dialogue were recorded on waxed records that were played in sync with the film via a turntable connected to a film projector through an interlocking mechanism. In the early 1930s, "Sound-on-film" began to supplant sound-on-disc as the technology of choice for adding a soundtrack to a movie. For detailed discussion, see Aristides Gazetas, *An Introduction to World Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 100.

[76] Yau, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film*, 53.

The Songstress Red Peony stimulated other film companies to embark on sound filmmaking in Shanghai. In the second half of 1931, Greater China 大中華 and Jinan 暨南, jointly produced the sound film *Blue Sky after Rain* (*Yuguo tianqing* 雨過天晴, 1931) and Tianyi Company 天一 produced *Spring Scenes in the Opera House* (*Stage Glamour*, *Gechang chunse* 歌場春色, 1931), both of which also contained operatic elements such as characters, opera singing and setting.[77]

Mei Lanfang had described his motivation for making opera films as follows: "I watch movies and am influenced by the art of film acting. I found the facial expressions of film actors inspiring because we opera singers can never see our own acting. … Film is like a special mirror that can reflect the whole picture of one's own performance."[78] In fact, he did not only simply record his stage performances, but he made use of the medium to preserve the essence of Peking opera and to expand its influence in time and space. He recognized the limits of the art of opera when new entertainment vehicles had come into being and were becoming increasingly popular. Reflecting on this issue led the visionary Mei Lanfang to think about the future of traditional opera. This concern, coupled with the dependance of film in this early stage on opera for its stories, actors and audiences, led to his frequent engagement in filmmaking in both the silent and sound eras of filmmaking.

Besides his own personal motivations, Mei's early engagement with filmmaking also resulted from some exterior factors. While domestic film companies utilized his fame to lure audiences to go to the movie theater, foreign film companies recognized Mei Lanfang as a token of Chinese culture and especially focused on Mei's cross-gender impersonation. Furthermore,

[77] *Blue Sky after Rain* (1931) was the first Chinese "sound-on-film" talkie. It was made in Japan with the aid of Japanese technology and technicians such as Henry Otani. *Spring Scenes in the Opera House* (1931) was made with the support of American technology. For details, see Yau, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries*, 3-4.
[78] Mei, *Wo de dianying shenghuo*, 82.

Mei's filmmaking during his transnational tours exemplified how Chinse opera and film collaborated on a wider scale by multicultural filmmaking crews to entertain a combination of audiences from east and west, old (opera) and new (film). In this sense, in the early 1930s, Mei exemplifies the film/opera encounter in both China and in the broader world.

1.2 Xue Juexian and the First Cantonese Talkie

1.2.1 Xue Juexian: An All-around Master Performer

While Mei Lanfang was achieving a transnational stardom for his influential overseas tours and starring in sound films, there was an excellent opera singer in South China who followed Mei's steps into filmmaking and went further in combining opera and cinema in a deeper and more innovative way. This man was Xue Juexian 薛覺先 (Sit Kok-sin, 1904-1956). Born in a wealthy business family, in Shunde, Guangdong Province, Xue was educated in Hong Kong from childhood. As a toddler, he accompanied his mother to opera theaters and became a child actor in the YMCA amateur troupe when he was ten. In 1921, he began his professional opera career and performed in Hong Kong, Macau and Guangzhou. Unlike Mei Lanfang whose only expertise lay in playing female roles, Xue was able to play female roles (*nandan*), and a wide range of male roles, including scholar-warriors (*wenwusheng*), aged men (*hongsheng*) and clowns (*chou*). "His flair for crossing between different role-types on stage earned him the title 'all- around master performer' (*wanneng laoguan*)."[79] In only a few years, Xue had established his fame in the Guangdong-Hong Kong region.

Xue was also good at learning from a variety of different art forms and opera genres. During his sojourn at Shanghai from 1925 to 1926, he watched different opera and stage performances

[79] Kenny K.K. Ng, "The Way of The Platinum Dragon: Xue Juexian and the Sound of Politics in 1930s Cantonese Cinema," in *Kaleidoscopic Histories: Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China*, ed. Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2018),162.

such as Peking opera, Kunqu and slapstick. He learned northern-style drumming, burlesque and acrobatics from the leading Peking opera singer Zhou Xinfang. Meanwhile, intrigued by motion pictures, Xue set up a film company and in 1926 made a silent film *Butterflies of the Waves* (*Langdie* 浪蝶, 1926). He wrote, directed and acted in this film. When he returned to Hong Kong in 1926 to promote this film, he rejoined local opera troupes and started to renovate Cantonese opera. By introducing the aria, make-up, costumes, and performance skills of northern operas such as Kunqu and Peking opera, he enriched Cantonese opera in almost every aspect of performance. What's more, he creatively added into Cantonese opera the use of western music instruments such as violin, guitar and saxophone. Xue's reform vitalized Cantonese opera as an attractive fusion of north and south, Chinese and western theatrical elements.

From the above introduction, we can notice that there were several differences between Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian on and behind the opera stage.[80] Regarded as a "cultural ambassador," Mei's pioneering tours and cross-boundary cooperation with filmmakers were a quasi-political and cultural mission. He accepted the invitation to make films because he could promote Chinese opera and solidify his own fame around the world. Taking the responsibility of publicizing Peking opera as the "National opera," he was eager to show authentic Chinese opera to a larger international audience. His films were closer to newsreel features and he chose to document himself. In contrast, Xue took the initiative to make radical changes in Cantonese opera by blending other Chinese and foreign musical elements. With fewer restrictions and with more cross-cultural innovations, Xue

80 Xue Juexian and Mei Lanfang made acquaintance in Guangzhou in 1928. During the Pacific War, Mei Lanfang stayed at Hong Kong and was under Japanese surveillance. Xue Juexian often visited Mei and provided living materials. To encourage each other, they often got together and made an agreement that they would not perform for Japanese troops. For the friendship between Mei and Xue, see Wu Kaiying 吳開英, *Xuemei qingxiang: Mei Lanfang Xue Juexian youyi ji* 雪梅清香:梅蘭芳薛覺先交誼紀 [Snow Plum Faint Scent: The Extraordinary Friendship of Mei Lanfang and Sit Kok-sin] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2018).

enjoyed more freedom in remaking his plays. He was the producer and director of his film. However, Xue just began his film career and his next plan was to make a Chinese sound picture.

1.2.2 *White Gold Dragon*: First Cantonese-language Talkie

In 1931, the success of the first talkie *The Songstress Red Peony* stimulated Shanghai cinema to follow up with their own sound pictures. Several months after the screening of *The Songstress Red Peony*, Tianyi Film Company produced *Spring Scenes in the Opera House*.[81] Unlike other major studios such as Lianhua and Mingxing 明星, which produced films reflecting social-political issues, Tianyi mainly made apolitical "entertainment" films and always prioritized profits in the fierce competiton in the Shanghai film industry. In 1933, Xue Juexian came to Shanghai to contact Runje Shaw (C. W. Shaw, Shao Zuiweng, 1896-1975), the manager of Tianyi, to make a Cantonese-language talkie. With several touring experiences in Southeast Asia, Xue had witnessed a vast Cantonese-language population in and outside of China. Meanwhile, owning a circuit of movie theaters in Southeast Asia, Runje Shaw also knew the potential of Cantonese sound films in the overseas market. As a result, Xue and Shao partnered and decided to remake Xue's most popular opera aria, *White Gold Dragon* 白金龍, into a talkie.[82] The opera *White Gold Dragon* borrowed the plot of a Hollywood film, *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (1926), with the setting changed to modern Hong Kong. Since this Cantonese, western-style opera had already achieved success during his opera tour in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macao and Southeast Asia, Xue Juexian had the confidence to remake the talkie. After discussions with Runme and Runrun, who were

[81] Led by the eldest Shaw Zuiweng, the renowned Shaw brothers had established a network of film production and distribution in home and Southeast Asia since mid-1920s. In 1925, they founded Tianyi Film Company (Unique) in Shanghai and established a film distribution base in Singapore. In 1934, after the success of White Golden Dragon, they established the Tianyi Studio in Hong Kong to particularly make Cantonese films.

[82] Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company 南洋兄弟煙草公司, which was one of the biggest tobacco company in China and Southeast Asia, sponsored Xue Juexian's opera tour in 1929 in Southeast Asia. As a result, the two parties agreed to a product tie-in (White Gold Dragon cigarettes) in the naming the leading role as well the title of the opera. This business cooperation continued in the production of the namesake film.

based in Singapore, Runje and Runde expressed confidence that Cantonese-speaking communities throughout Southeast Asia would be interested in the film.

Therefore, Tianyi covered the cost of the film's production and Xue provided the script, acting, songs and general cast supervision. The namesake film *White Gold Dragon* (*Baijinglong*, 1933) was produced in Shanghai in only twenty days. This film, like its opera predecessor, was set in modern Hong Kong and told a romance comedy about a rich young man named Bai Jinlong pursuing his love of a poor nightclub waitress. The film stormed the box office throughout Cantonese-speaking regions, including Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macao, and cities in Southeast Asia.[83]

The collaboration of Xue Juexian and Tianyi shows the primitive nexus between sound films and Cantonese opera. Unlike the first Mandarin talkie *The Songstress Red Peony*, which invited Mei Lanfang to dub the singing voice of the leading actress, the first Cantonese talkie showed a deeper collaboration between the two art forms. As Kenny Ng points out, "Xue's biographical ventures and the historical vicissitudes of Cantonese operatic film experimentation certainly go beyond the surface of any general description of cultural risk-taking or entrepreneurship."[84] From then on, Xue embarked on a career as both an opera singer and a movie producer, making thirty-six films in all, twenty-one of which he adapted from his opera plays and arias.

White Gold Dragon was also a milestone in Cantonese filmmaking. Its success convinced Tianyi of the potential transnational market in South China and Southeast Asia. As a result, in 1934 it set up a branch in Hong Kong to make Cantonese-language films to expand its market into Southeast Asia. As Klavier J. Wang has written, "From Shanghai to Hong Kong to Southeast Asia,

[83] Sai-shing Yung, "Territorialization and the Entertainment Industry of the Shaw Brothers in Southeast Asia," in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2008),136.
[84] Ng, "The Way of the Platinum Dragon," 161.

the birth and popularity of Cantonese films well narrate the 'worlding' of Cantonese culture, which was brought into contour by the globally travelling Sinophonic population."[85]

The earliest Cantonese film proved that the antecedents for the success of Cantonese cinema lay in the enormous popularity of Cantonese opera. However, as many scholars have emphasized, Tianyi's transfer from Shanghai to Hong Kong was not entirely voluntary. Film companies like Tianyi that engaged in Cantonese filmmaking had to face a feud between the rising Cantonese film industries and the dominant Shanghai cinema. Underlining the conflict were the cultural politics revolving around language and national building in Chinese society.

1.2.3 Cantonese vs. Mandarin: The Cultural Politics of Early Sound Filmmaking

In China, there was a vast and complicated linguistic system, containing countless languages and dialects in different regions and ethnic groups. In the circle of opera culture, language played a dominant role in characterizing different genres. Peking opera and Cantonese opera have quite different accents, intonations, vocabulary and grammar. Cantonese opera is rooted in the Guangdong and Guangxi regions while Peking opera's home lays in northern China, in places like Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. Historically, Peking opera was considered a "higher" stage art because of its residency in Peking, the Qing Dynasty capital. Also, upper class patronage from the feudal aristocracy in late Qing period, and from politicians and intellectuals in the early Republic period helped solidify Peking opera's elite image. Conversely, Cantonese opera was considered a "lowly" regional opera genre based in the borderlands of Canton and its rural hinterlands. In the 1920s, through the innovations of Mei Lanfang and other leading performers, Peking opera was touted as the "National Opera" of China. Cantonese opera and other regional genres hence fell into a crisis of marginalization. To survive, many Cantonese opera singers like Xue Juexian and Ma

[85] Klaiver J. Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Culture: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 45.

Shizeng (1909-1964) innovated the opera and cultivated overseas markets such as in Southeast and North America.

With the advent of sound and made language and music a priority, these rivalries intensified. Witnessing the rise of Cantonese-language films, the Nationalist government implemented strict screen policies against Cantonese films beginning in 1934.[86] In 1937, the government announced a new film policy that totally prohibited screening dialect films. The rationale was to maintain "the linguistic and political unification of the nation." Cantonese filmmakers objected strenuously, and defied the policy by setting up the South China Film Society and launching a large-scale "Save the Cantonese Films Campaign." Ultimately their efforts forced the National government to suspense the policy, and with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, the ban was permanently shelved.

Both Peking and Cantonese opera had supplied an endless stream of characters, plots, stage effects, costumes and stars to supply an insatiable demand in and out of China. To fully understand early Chinese cinema, therefore, we must consider Chinese opera as an intimate and decisive influence. The antecedents of Chinese opera functioned as a pre-history and the existing framework of Chinse cinema. At the same time, the rivalry between Mandarin films and Cantonese films also continued earlier rivalries between regional operas. Cantonese opera and then Cantonese films faced a stigma when competing with Peking opera and stars like Mei Lanfang. However, a transnational diasporic population provided a larger living space for Cantonese culture. In a word, early Chinese sound filmmaking intersected with the opera on numerous levels, including plays, stages, costumes, and personnel, and used opera's local, national, and transnational networks to build an audience for film.

[86] Kenny K.K. Ng, "The Way of the Platinum Dragon," 157.

1.3 "Let's Make a Cantonese Talkie in San Francisco": Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue's Encounter in America

In 1933 when *White Gold Dragon* was produced in Shanghai, another Cantonese talkie, *Romance of Opera Singers,* was made in San Francisco. Although it was one of the earliest Cantonese sound films, this film is less known and discussed among historians of Chinese film. The reason lies in paradigm that emphasizes geo-political borders when defining "Chinese film" and "Chinese cinema." Directed by the Chinese American Joseph

Sunn Jue in San Francisco, the film was "born" in "foreign" surroundings. However, centering on overseas Chinese experiences, the film told a transnational story. What's more, Kwan Man-ching, the film's producer aimed to distribute it in American Chinatowns, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and in Southeast Asia. With such a complicated cinematic identity, *Romance of Opera Singers* represented an alternative Chinese cinema that occurred in a transitional and diasporic context beyond the "national-paradigm." Before looking in more detail at *Romance of Opera Singers,* I will briefly introduce the early history of Chinese diasporic filmmaking.

1.3.1 Early Chinese Diasporic Filmmaking

Before *Romance of Opera Singers,* there were several films made by Chinese Americans. Although they were small-budget films, the following cases show us that the history of Chinese filmmaking in the U.S. is chronologically synchronized with the history of film making in Shanghai and Hong Kong. In addition, these films and documentaries focus on Chinese domestic lives and ancient tales, aiming to present Chinese culture to a western audience. In 1916, a San Francisco-born Chinese named Marion E. Wong directed *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (Guan Wudi 關武帝, 1916). It was a modern domestic story featuring

a traditional Chinese mythical figure Guon Gwon, who symbolizes bravery and righteousness.[87] In 1921, a group of Chinese immigrants and students, led by Mei Xuechou and Li Zeyuan, co-founded the Great Wall Film Company in Brooklyn, New York. After making two short films – *Chinese Costumes* (1922) and *Chinese Martial Arts* (1922) – it relocated to Shanghai and continued making films of various genres including social problems, martial arts and animation.[88] Almost at the same time, in November 1921, *Lotus Blossom* (*Lianhuaxin chush* 蓮花心出世, 1921) was shown in Los Angeles. Targeting an American audience, this film was captioned with English subtitles and advertised in the local English newspaper.[89] The co-director James B. Leong (Leong But-Jung), who had worked in Hollywood, organized a mixed-raced crew and cast to make this film.[90]

As China's film industry developed in the mid-1920s, Chinese immigrants in the U.S. and Southeast Asia could watch newsreels and feature films imported from China. The success of Chinese cinema stimulated local immigrants' passion for making films in and for local Chinese communities. In 1926, sponsored by Chinese communities in San Francisco, *The Silk Bouquet*, later retitled *The Dragon Horse* (Xinbian Xue Pinggui Qianzhuan 新編薛平貴前傳, 1926)

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[87] For the pioneering filmmaking of Marion E. Wong, see Wei Shiyu 魏時煜 [S. Louisa Wei], *Xiage chuanqi: Kuayang dianying yu nüxing xianfeng* 霞哥傳奇:跨洋電影電影與女性先鋒 [The Legend of Esther Eng: Transoceanic Filmmakers and Women Pioneers] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2016).

[88] Great Wall Film Company was closed in 1930. Film historians attribute its short existence to the founders' maladjustment to the Chinese environment of film production. See Xiao, Zhiwei 肖志偉 and Che Mo 陳墨, "Kuahai de Changcheng: cong jianli dao tanta — Changcheng huapian gongsi lishi cutan" 跨海的"長城":從建立到坍塌—長城畫片公司歷史粗探 [The "Great Wall" that Crossed the Ocean: Its Rise and Fall – A Preliminary Study of the History of Great Wall Film Co.], Dangdai dianying 當代電影 3 (2004): 36–44.

[89] Boyle Heights History Blog, March 3, 2016, http://boyleheightshistoryblog.blogspot.com/2016/03/lotus-blossom-first-chinese-american.html

[90] The cast and crew included Caucasians (co-director Francis J. Grandon, screenwriters and cameramen), mix-raced Chinese American (Lady Tsen Mei or Josephine Augusta Moy) and Japanese (two supporting actors, Abe Yutaka and Kino Gorou). Lady Tsen Mei was a multiracial vaudeville singer and actress in the 1910s and 1920s. Abe Yutaka and Kino Gorou are representative Japanese actors in early Hollywood films, the former returned Japan in 1925 and became a successful director. Probably because of the engagement of Japanese actor, *Lotus Blossom* was imported and screened in Japan under the Japanese title "蓮華姫".

premiered in San Francisco. Adapted from a famous Chinese opera, this film was directed by Harry Revier and targeted both Chinese and American audiences.[91]

The films mentioned above show that early Chinese diasporic cinema was characterized by personal interests and limited influence. Most of them were one-time trials and were not publicly screened in theatres. But in 1933, a Chinese filmmaker, Kwan Man-ching, came to San Francisco to distribute Chinese films, and his encounter and then partnership with the first-generation Chinese American Joseph Sunn Jue changed the scenario of overseas Chinese filmmaking. Kwan not only successfully distributed Lianhua films, he bridged the San Francisco-based Grandview company and his own Hong Kong/Shanghai-based Lianhua. From then on, he and Jue and other transnational film pioneers strived for deeper cooperation between San Francisco and Hong Kong filmmakers.

1.3.2 Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue's Encounter

Kwan Man-ching was born in Guangzhou and was educated in Hong Kong and America. He had learned filmmaking techniques in Hollywood and worked as a consultant for director D.W. Griffith on the latter's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). Joseph Sunn Jue was born in a Chinese merchant family in San Francisco. He also had experience working in Hollywood as art director for a silent film featuring Anna May Wong.

In 1933, Kwan Man-ching, then an employee of Hong Kong branch of Lianhua film company, came to America to sell Chinese films in the United States. His plan was to hunt for business opportunities and to raise money for his company which then had financial problems. In his luggage, there were two Linahua feature films and a documentary: *Spring Dream of the Ancient*

[91] Besides the United States, Chinese immigrants also made films in Southeast Asia. In 1927, Chinese immigrant Liu Beijin 劉貝錦 (Liu Peh Jing, 1902-1959) made the first feature picture film *The New Immigrants* (*Xin Ke* 新客, 1927) in Singapore and Malaya.

Capital (故都春夢, 1930), *Three Modern Women* (三個摩登女性,1933), and *Shanghai Battle* (十九路軍抗敵光榮史, 1931). The last was a documentary featuring Chinese resistance against the Japanese in 1931. Exporting film and finding its audience outside China was a reasonable choice for major companies like Lianhua at a time when Hollywood films dominated the Chinese market and when the political environment was highly unstable. Also, the emergence of sound films in the early 1930s provided a good chance to distribute films in Chinese communities abroad with shared language and cultural roots.

In his autobiography, Kwan recorded the cities he went to in America and Canada: San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, Washington D.C, New York, Boston, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver, as well as others. The reception was a success.[92] Among his three films, the documentary aroused the most intense nationalist feelings among immigrants. People told Kwan two years ago that when the battle was reported in the local newspaper, they immediately sent money back to support the resistance against the Japanese army. When they read in the newspapers about the Chinese victory, they set off firecrackers. Why were they so concerned about China's political situation? Chinese overseas had a long history of distanced nationalism since the late Qing Dynasty. For the early migrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, the traditional concept of "Luoye guigen 落葉歸根" was common among them. Literally translated as "falling leaves settle on their roots," it reflected their cultural and political loyalty to their homes and motherland. "Gen" refers to "roots" which "take on additional meanings as Chinese culture and a geographic entity called China. It is this bond between overseas Chinese and China that undergirds the unique racial and cultural

[92] See more in Kwan Man-ching's autobiography *Zhongguo Yintan Waishi* 中國銀壇外史 [Unofficial History of the Chinese Silver Screen] (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1976).

identity of the overseas Chinese."[93] Therefore, the political situation in China directly influenced immigrants' diasporic life.

As an elite with social connections in both China and America, Kwan's transnational identity and social status enabled him to have greater "distance" between Chinatown and motherland. In his mind, Chinese long-distance national feeling and their actual sojourned life reconciled with each other through fresh visual experience. Witnessing the enthusiasm of the local people towards Chinese films, Kwan further believed in a bright future for releasing Chinese films in North America. Kwan and Jue then set up the Grandview Film Company 大觀電影公司 to produce *Romance of the Songsters* (*Gelü qingchao* 歌侶情潮, 1930).

1.3.3 *Romance of Opera Singers*: A Chinese Film Born in America

Set in San Francisco, the film told of a love triangle in a traditional Cantonese opera troupe. The storyline was inspired by the new romantic literature that was popular among youngsters in China. Kwan included a number of scenes reflecting opera actors' and actresses' stage performance to cater to Cantonese opera fans. After watching a test sample, Kwan was satisfied with the sound and light effects and actor's performance and promised him promotion in Hong Kong. Meanwhile he urged Jue to raise money to buy a recording machine so that they could make Cantonese talkies in Hong Kong. He also suggested Grandview become the proxy of Lianhua to distribute second-round screenings of Kwan's films, preparing itself for bigger projects and cooperation between the two companies.

In July 1933, *Romance of the Songsters* premiered in San Francisco and quickly made a stir in Chinese communities around America. Chinese actors and themes combined with San

[93] L. Ling-chi Wang, "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States," *Daedalus* 120, no. 2, (1991): 182.

Francisco's familiar landscape made the audience feel a sense of dual intimacy. More importantly, unlike the Shanghai-produced Lianhua films Kwan had brought that featured the northern accents of Mandarin Chinese, *Romance of the Songsters* was, as Kwan called it, "the first Cantonese sound feature." The familiar accent of a native place on screen further stimulated people's nostalgia and strengthened ties to their new home — Chinatown. It shortened the distance from the home country, and harmoniously blended on screen two disparate places. Until the 1930s, most Chinese immigrants were laborers and small businessmen. Living abroad, Chinese immigrants considered themselves sojourners and outsiders, especially as the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act indicated deep racism and suspicion among those they met in their new home.

When *Romance* was released, Kwan had already returned to Hong Kong. Later he received the pamphlet of *Romance* from Jue and the good news of its popularity in America. He immediately reported it to Lianhua's manager Luo Mingyou who afterwards invited Chiu to Hong Kong for releasing the film. In January 1934, *Romance of the Songsters* was released in Hong Kong and won a sound applause. Hong Kong audiences considered it a Cantonese film with an exotic foreign setting. They enjoyed the familiar storyline but were also attracted to the novel setting in the United States and Chinatown. This is for the first time an American-made Chinese film was exhibited and made a hit in China.

Romance of the Songsters was a contemporary of Xue Juexian's *White Gold Dragon*. Made in the same year of 1933, both films were based on Cantonese operas. However, because *Romance* was made in America, it has long been trivialized among historians of Chinese cinema. It is, however, appropriate to situate *Romance* in the framework of Chinese diasporic film which in the early 1930s, particularly because of its strong ties to transnational diasporic opera culture.

Similarly, the film *White Gold Dragon* enables us to understand filmmaking that breaks the dichotomy of "center" and "periphery," "inside" and "outside," "Chinese" and "American."

Conclusion

It may at first seem nothing more than a coincidence that the first Chinese-language sound films, whether made in Shanghai, Hong Kong or in San Francisco, were all based on Chinese opera.[94] Yet what lies behind was the cross-boundary cinematic activities that epitomized different local opera cultures. Before the invention of motion pictures at the end of the nineteenth-century, Chinese opera, which included a variety of spectacles including music, singing, acrobatic choreography and drama, was the most popular pastime for Chinese audiences at home and in the diaspora.

Traditional operas played an important role in the development of Chinese film history, especially with the introduction of talkies. As Jean Ma puts it, "opera was an important precedent for sound film, constituting a preexisting matrix of possibilities for the combination of songs and storytelling, for endowing music with an emphatic expressive function within a narrational context. This matrix of possibilities would find its fullest and most systematic elaboration in the opera film, a category that flourished after the introduction of synchronized sound technology."[95] What's more, sound filmmaking highlighted distinct linguistic traditions in different Chinese regions as well as the broader diaspora. The advent of sound enabled Hong Kong and Chinese diasporas to make films to meet their own interests and language cultures. During the pioneering period of filmmaking, opera practitioners like Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian and filmmakers like Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue, functioned as cultural threads connecting diasporic Chinese

[94] Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu, "Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (2002): 78.
[95] Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University of Press, 2015) 1-2.

communities in and out of China by "reinvent[ing] filmic language and acting styles to blend the visual and the aural."[96] In this sense, the early sound films, like Chinese opera, were not pure commercial products but also cultural texts with shared identification on a transnational level into early twentieth century.

Finally, by examining the production and distribution of the three earliest Chinese talkies *The Songstress Red Peony*, *White Gold Dragon* and *Romance of the Songsters* and showing the development of the opera-film relation in the 1920s and 1930s, we can gain insight into Chinese diaspora film history in its initial stage. We can also rewrite a chapter in the hybrid history of transnational Chinese visual and stage culture, which current Chinese film historiography focused on the nation-state has rendered invisible. Early Chinese-language sound filmmaking evolved with inter-flows of personnel (Chinese immigrants, filmmakers, and opera performers), capital from patrons of opera theaters and film companies, techniques such as gramophone records, sound and color film, and culture (traditional stage opera art and Hollywood film). The transregional flow of capital and talent between Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Southeast Asia shows filmmakers chasing profits while also contesting the cultural politics of regional and national identities.

In the next chapter, I will further explore early transnational Chinese filmmaking, by focusing on the female diasporic filmmaker Esther Eng and the social and cultural context in which she worked. Following the lead of Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue, she engaged in transnational filmmaking in wartime Hong Kong, and made films that catered to Chinese diasporic audiences across the Pacific.

[96] Laikwan Pang, "The Making of a National Cinema," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, eds. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward, (London: British Film Institute, 2020), 66.

Chapter 2

Esther Eng: A Female Figure in Diasporic Filmmaking

Introduction

This chapter revisits the history of Chinese cinema by focusing on the early years of diasporic filmmaking. It analyzes Esther Eng, a contemporary of Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue and the first Chinese American female director of Chinese-language films in both China and the US in the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike the previous studies that focus on Eng's charisma or her sense of national identity, this study regards Eng as a diasporic figure who embodied the Sino-American filmic interactions and negotiations at the height of war and global geopolitical instability in the 1930s and 1940s.[97] As Yiman Wang has argued, "by inserting the third term of diasporic into the picture, this triangular structure foregrounds the process of Sino-American encounters that are instigated, mediated, and complicated by the shuttling, interstitial figure."[98] Eng and her contemporaries represent a diasporic cinema that neither "Chinese cinema" nor "American cinema" can encapsulate. Like many other early Chinese films, nearly all of Esther Eng's films do not survive. Some were burnt during World War II while many others were simply lost. Only two films remain: *Golden Gate Girl* (*Jinmennü* 金門女, 1941) and *Murder in New York*

[97] For previous studies on Esther Eng, see Law Kar, "The American connection in the early Hong Kong cinema," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds., Poshek Fu and David Desser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 44-70; Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2004); Wei Shiyu 魏時煜[S. Louisa Wei], Xige chuanqi: Kuayang dianying yu *nüxing xianfeng* 霞哥傳奇: 跨洋電影電影與女性先鋒 [The Legend of Esther Eng: Transoceanic Filmmakers and Women Pioneers] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2016); S. Louisa Wei, "She Wears Slacks: Pioneer Women Directors Esther Eng and Dorothy Arzner," in *Transcending Space and Time: Early Cinematic Experience of Hong Kong*, *Book III: Re-discovering Pioneering Females in Early Chinese Cinema & Grandview's Cross-border Productions*, eds., Winnie Fu and Earnest C. Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 110-144. Also see S. Louisa Wei, *Golden Gate Girls* (Blue Queen Cultural Communication Ltd., 2013), DVD, 90 min.

[98] Yiman Wang, "Watching Anna May Wong in Republican China," in *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, eds., Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2014), 170.

Chinatown (*Niuyue Tangrenjie suishian* 紐約唐人街碎屍案, 1961). Research materials in this chapter are mainly from secondary sources that provide clues of Esther Eng's career and life in China and the US. These materials show that Eng was a transnational diasporic figure who experienced legendary cinematic journeys during and after the World War II across the Pacific.

This chapter also challenges the host/home binary that has been over-emphasized in studies of diasporic cinema. Explaining the reluctance among scholars to use the term "diasporic cinema," Song Hwee Lim believes that "discourse on diaspora and migration tend to assume a host/home binary, [but] this distinction becomes less useful the longer the history of migration."[99] Although it is necessary to pay attention to the filmmaker's sense of home and cultural belonging when studying Chinese diasporic cinema, the experiences of Esther Eng and her diasporic contemporaries show that the conception of home and the host country is interchangeable in Chinese transnational filmmaking. In the long history of Chinese diasporic cinema, different generations of filmmakers have had different perceptions of "China" and "Chinese-ness." Eng began her cinematic career by making patriotic films in the US but her work in Hong Kong developed new themes of urbanism or modernity. These evolving perspectives on cultural belonging resist simple binary labels such as "Chinese" or "American" but demand a more nuanced and flexible approach to Chinese diasporic cinema.

2.1 The Stage in Chinatowns: Cantonese Opera and Chinese Immigrants

In the mid-ninetieth century, Cantonese opera (*Yueju* 粵劇) followed in the steps of the first Chinese immigrants from the Pearl River Delta of South China to North America. Long before the invention of the motion picture, Cantonese opera served as a cultural ambassador and integrating power for the Chinese immigrants abroad. First, in San Francisco, and later in Los Angeles,

[99] Lim, "Six Chinese Cinemas in Search of a Historiography," 36.

Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Boston, New York, and other major cities in North America, Cantonese opera exploded in popularity and became a cultural connection in the community life of Chinese immigrants.[100] Yet, because of policies on Chinese exclusion in the United States and Canada, the opera business waxed and waned from the 1870s to the 1920s. In the 1920s, Chinese opera troupes finally formed a network of opera performance and revived the fluidity of movement in the Pacific Northwest region.

San Francisco was the first destination for the Cantonese opera troupes and later became a principal hub for Cantonese opera culture outside of China. By 1925, it had two major landmark opera theatres: the Mandarin Theatre and the Great China Theatre. With a capacity of over seven hundred seats each, both theatres had daily performances and regularly invited Cantonese opera troupes from South China. The two theatres and their offshoots were commercial and political-ideological rivals. The Mandarin Theatre was affiliated with the Constitutional Party of China, which advocated for peaceful reform and a constitutional monarchy, while the Great China Theatre was affiliated with the Nationalist Party of China, which advocated for revolution and a Chinese republic.[101] To the local immigrants, these theatres were cultural and public spaces inseparable with their everyday life. The Great China Theatre (now the Great Star Theatre) recounted its early history and its relation to the local immigrants:

> In the early years of the theater, most of the Chinese American population was illiterate. While westerners got most of their history, cultural identity, and ethics

[100] Hong Fook Tong 鴻福堂 is the first Cantonese opera troupe that arrived and performed in San Francisco in 1852. Vancouver also has a history of Cantonese opera performance that can be traced back to 1898. See Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Transnationalism and Everyday Practice: Cantonese Theatres of North America in the 1920s," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 25.1 (2016): 107-130.
[101] Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theatre in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 23.

> from the church, Chinese Americans spent hours each week watching morality tales play out on stage complete with many of the same sorts of archetypical characters that one would see in a Commedia dell'arte play or even a Shakespearian drama. Soldiers exemplified qualities of bravery and loyalty. Love stories play out complete with cautionary tales of the perils of infidelity... The theater was a gathering place, a community center, as well as a cultural and civic hub for a part of the community that lived an insular life outside of the half square mile of Chinatown.[102]

For the children born and raised in the Chinatown, theatres undertook more formative and educational functions.[103] Many immigrant parents took their American-born children to Chinese theatres to pass on theatrical culture, and Esther Eng's parents are no exception. Born in San Francisco in 1914, Esther Eng was the third generation of a Chinese merchant family in the Chinatown. Eng's grandfather came from Taishan County of Guangdong Province in the late nineteenth century. Esther's father was a successful businessman who was "a Jack of all trades who could do anything" while her mother was fond of reading and watching Cantonese opera.[104] Together they brought up ten children, with Esther as their fourth child. As Cantonese opera enthusiasts, the family frequented the Mandarin Theatre at 1021 Grant Avenue, three blocks away from their home. Although there is no documented memoir of Esther Eng's early experience in the theatres, it is easy to imagine how the younger generation of Chinese immigrants were acculturated

[102] "About," on The Great Star Theatre's website, <greatstarsf.com/about/>, accessed 15 December 2018 (site discontinued).
[103] Wendy Rouse Jorae, *The Children of Chinatown: San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
[104] S. Louisa Wei's interview with Esther's youngest sister Sally Ng in Wei, *Golden Gate Girls*.

in the opera's aesthetic traditions, including the thriving music, dazzling costumes, various traditional roles, and song lyrics. Other Chinese immigrants with the memory of growing up in Chinatowns recorded similar opera-going experiences. Wayson Choy 崔維新, a Canadian writer raised in Vancouver's Chinatown recalled:

> For years, Mother went regularly with her friends to the [Chinese theatres]; she thought nothing of taking me, even when I was only a few months old. Other mothers had their children with them, too, and newborns nursed indifferently at breasts wet with milk.… Whatever daily struggles my parents faced, the Cantonese opera at night bestowed upon me such a wealth of high drama….
>
> Mother whispered into my ear who each was as, one by one, the performers made a few stylized movements to introduce their character, briefly sang their histories, and danced away before my amazed eyes: that's the Hsiao-sheng, the Scholar-Prince; there, the Princess with pretty eyes; now the grand King with his servants: last, with orchestra roars, the fierce South Wind General, his soldiers swirling behind him, tumbling like madmen….
>
> I stood beside [my mother] on the box provided for children, my knees bending and straightening as if I myself were majestically stomping about the stage.[105]

Choy's reminiscence echoed those of many other immigrants. Young Esther Eng and her siblings were also taken to the theatres by their parents to learn of the ancient tales from China by mimicking them verbally and physically. Chinese schools in North America even trained students

[105] Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows: A Memory of a Past Lost and Found* (New York: Picador, 2000), 43-52.

to perform opera in public as extracurricular activities.[106] In traditional Chinese society, opera performers and musicians were from the underclass, and children of affluent families would not be encouraged to perform opera in public. It was different in Chinatown communities in North America. Cantonese opera theatres were not only a daily entertainment or "a vehicle of nostalgia" for the older Chinese generation, but also a formative venue to foster cultural identity and linguistic competence among the Chinese youngsters.[107]

In the late 1920s, the landscape of opera culture in North American Chinatowns became more sophisticated. On the one hand, with the widespread distribution of phonographic records, Cantonese opera reinforced its status as an artistic expression and middle-class leisure.[108] The advent of sound pictures in the late 1920s gradually ended the unique place of opera in the Chinatowns. After the technical reformation, theatres functioned as both traditional opera stages and modern movie houses. People were attracted to film for its low price and the novelty. As a teenager Esther Eng worked at the Mandarin Theatre in the box office and got to watch various Hollywood films. At the same time, Chinese filmmakers, including some Cantonese opera stars, were preparing to transform stage performances into sound feature films, which resulted in the earliest Cantonese talkies.

2.2 From Stage to Screen: Transnational Cantonese Talkies

Early Cantonese cinema had its roots in the Cantonese opera. The abundant texts of opera and the experienced opera artists provided the earliest scripts and cast for Cantonese talkies. Furthermore, Cantonese talkies sustained the theatrical appeal for native Cantonese, if not all

[106] Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theatre in North America*, 209.
[107] Rao, "Transnationalism and Everyday Practice," 109.
[108] For discussions of the early phonography industry and Cantonese opera recordings. See Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theatre in North America*, 202-207. Also see Rong Shicheng 容世誠, *Yueyun liusheng: Changpian gongye yu Guangdong quyi (1903-1953)* 粵韻留聲:唱片工業與廣東曲藝(1903-1953) [Cantonese Opera from the Gramophone: A Cultural History, 1903-1953] (Hong Kong. Tiandi tushu, 2006).

Chinese, audiences. As noted above, the two earliest Cantonese talkies *White Golden Dragon* and *Romance of Opera Singers* were produced and premiered not in the biggest Cantonese-speaking region in Guangdong and Hong Kong, but instead in Shanghai and San Francisco respectively. Xue Juexian, the director of *White Golden Dragon*, was a versatile Cantonese opera star who brought innovations to traditional opera in the 1920s and 1930s.[109] "Rejecting the highly popular genres of martial arts and magic spirit films prevalent in Shanghai and Hong Kong," *White Golden Dragon*, released in 1933, was a "Cantonese operatic film experimentation… blending the art of Hollywood romantic comedy with a Westernized form of Cantonese opera."[110] Xue's efforts to modernize Cantonese cinema was echoed by diasporic filmmakers who also aspired to make sound films.

In the same year of 1933, *Romance of Opera Singers* was made in San Francisco with Kwan Man-ching as the producer and Joseph Sunn Jue as the director. Kwan Man-ching was born in Guangzhou and educated in Hong Kong and the US. He had learned filmmaking techniques in Hollywood and worked as a consultant for director D.W. Griffith on the latter's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). In 1933, he met Joseph Sunn Jue on his trip to North America to sell Chinese film productions in the United States and Canada, and they set up the Grandview Film Company to produce *Romance of Opera Singers*. Joseph Sunn Jue was born in a rich Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco. He also had the experience of working in Hollywood, as an art director for a silent film featuring Anna May Wong 黃柳霜. *Romance of Opera Singers* was another opera-and-film fusion by drawing on Hollywood's romance film style. Its English title indicates the theme of the film and the profession of the protagonists; it told a love story between opera performers in a

[109] *White Golden Dragon* is an adaption of the Hollywood film *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (1926) directed by Malcolm St. Clair. More discussion in Chapter One.
[110] Kenny K.K. Ng, "The Way of The Platinum Dragon," 159.

touring troupe setting in San Francisco. The popular opera stars' screen presence was essential to the film's success.[111] After premiering *Romance of Opera Singers* in San Francisco, Kwan and Jue, with the support of the Shanghai-based Lianhua film company, screened it in Hong Kong in January 1934.[112]

The way the two earliest Cantonese talkies were produced and distributed demonstrates that from the very beginning Cantonese-language filmmaking was a transregional and even transnational activity. Cantonese talkies were made and viewed in diasporic Cantonese communities in and out of China. Scholars have often asserted that from the early 1930s, the Hong Kong-Guangdong region emerged as the hub of Cantonese talkies, exporting its products to Cantonese-speaking communities in South China, Southeast Asia, and North America.[113] The reality, however, is that from the early 1930s Hong Kong was not the only place making Cantonese films. Target markets such as Chinatowns in North America, could also produce films marketed to Hong Kong. Cantonese talkies were flourishing: many Cantonese-speaking Chinese were consumers eager to watch these talkies and these consumers could be transformed into producers. The two-way interactions between Hong Kong and San Francisco thus complicate the landscape of the production and distribution of early Cantonese talkies.

As the successor of Cantonese opera, early Cantonese filmmaking continued to thrive thanks to the diasporic cultural network. Within this network transnational filmmakers functioned as

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[111] The male and female lead of *Gelü qingchao* are Kwan Tak-hing 關德興 and Wu Dip-ying 胡蝶影, respectively. They enjoyed huge stardom cross the Pacific in the Cantonese opera circle.

[112] The Lianhua Film Company was one of the three dominant film production companies based in Shanghai during the 1930s. The other two were the Mingxing Film Company and the Tianyi Film Company, the forerunner of the Hong Kong-based Shaw Brothers Studio. Kwan Man-ching was an employee of Lianhua's Hong Kong branch when making and distributing *Romance of Opera Singers*. See Kwan Man-ching, *Zhongguo yintan waishi*, 143-147.

[113] Emilie Y.Y. Yeh, ed., *Kaleidoscopic Histories: Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Republican China* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2018); Stephen Teo, "The Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema: Emergence, Development and Decline," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, eds., Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 103-110.

connecting threads between Chinese communities in and out of China when they produced and distributed films. The early transnational films, like its predecessor Chinese opera, were not pure commercial products but also cultural texts with shared identification in the early twentieth century. A case in point is Esther Eng and her transnational cinematic career in the 1930s and 1940s.

2.3 From Chinatown to Hollywood: Esther Eng's Early Filmmaking

Like Joseph Sunn Jue, Esther Eng started her film career in San Francisco. In 1935, inspired by the success of *Romance of Opera Singers*, Eng's father set up the Kwong Ngai Talking Pictures Company (Cathy Pictures) with his friends in San Francisco. The first film production, *Heartaches* (*Xinhen* 心恨, 1935), was produced by Esther Eng and Quon Yum Lim 唐棣忠 in Hollywood by a mix of Chinese and Western talents.[114] The film depicts a tragic love between a Cantonese opera singer (played by the famous Cantonese performer Wei Kim-fong 韋劍芳 and a young pilot trained in the US (played by Beal Wong 黃悲露) in the midst of war. The singer financed her boyfriend's training but refused his love in the wake of war to urge him to join the Chinese resistance against Japanese invasion. The pilot fulfilled his military mission and returned to the US with his new wife. Hearing the striking news, the singer fell ill and passed away. On 15 and 16 February 1936, *Heartaches* was screened at the Mandarin Theatre in San Francisco. The *Los Angeles Times* hailed the film as "the first oriental production with sound finished in Hollywood."[115] *Film Daily* also described it as "a modern drama with an aviation background on the order of American films."[116]

Unlike its predecessor *Romance of Opera Singers*, *Heartaches* was more ambitious in theme, production, and distribution. With the same group of protagonists (young Cantonese opera performers) as *Romance of Opera Singers*, *Heartaches* was produced with a strong patriotic intent.

[114] Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 92-97.
[115] "All-Chinese Film Made," *The Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 1935.
[116] "Finish Chinese Film on Coast," *Film Daily*, 6 February 1936.

Wartime resistance in filmmaking was inseparable with the growing nationalist sentiment in China and the Chinese diaspora. By the mid-1930s China had entered a period of national crisis with an incessant civil war between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party and increasing Japanese encroachment in the northeast. The Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the Shanghai Incident in 1932 exacerbated the crisis and agitated national defense at its height. Under these circumstances patriotic cinema emerged, first in Shanghai and then in Hong Kong and California.[117] In 1935, Kwan Man-ching screened *The Life Line* (*Shengminxian* 生命線, 1935) in Chinatowns across North America. The film was a documentary about Chinese resistance against the Japanese military attack on Shanghai. Produced by Kwan as an independent filmmaker, the documentary stirred patriotic feelings among Chinese immigrants and was screened for years after its premiere. Inspired by *The Life Line*, Esther Eng blended in her first film *Heartache* a love story of young overseas Chinese with long-distance patriotism, expressing a distinct kind of diasporic identity held by the overseas Chinese within a transnational political context.

Besides the patriotic theme, *Heartaches* pioneered Chinese-language film in Hollywood. As the co-producer of this film, Esther Eng rented a studio in Los Angeles with the help of James Wong Howe 黃宗霑, a renowned Hollywood cinematographer.[118] She even hired Paul Ivano, the most famous cinematographer in Hollywood, and applied technicolour technique in production.[119] Working between San Francisco's Chinatown and a Hollywood studio, Esther Eng took advantage

[117] For discussions on patriotic films, see Zhiwei Xiao, "The Myth about Chinese Leftist Cinema," in *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750-Present*, eds., James A. Cook, Joshua Goldstein Matthew D. Johnson, Sigrid Schmalzer (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 145-164. See also Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59-83.
[118] According to Law Kar and Frank Bren's study, the Kwong Ngai Talking Pictures Company had offices at 1010 Washington Street in San Francisco and 6534 Fountain Avenue in Hollywood, the latter of which was possibly the studio Esther Eng rented to make *Heartaches*. See Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 92-103.
[119] Wei, *Xiage chuanqi*, 47-48.

of geographical closeness and personal relations to make Chinese-language films in Hollywood. Later she brought *Heartaches* to Hong Kong and started her transnational career as a film director.

2.4 Patriot and Pioneering Directress: Esther Eng's First Stopover in Hong Kong

From 1935 to 1941, Hong Kong cinema challenged the dominance of Shanghai-based Mandarin cinema for the first time thanks to the rise of sound pictures. This boom was inseparable from the acute sociopolitical environment in China during that period, which saw a potential and later an actual full-scale war between China and Japan. Several big studios such as the San Francisco-based Grandview Film Company and the Shanghai-based Tianyi Film Company moved to Hong Kong. In 1935 Hong Kong produced about thirty talkies, a rapid increase from the annual output of four or five silent films in the 1920s.[120] In 1936 patriotic films exploded, with successful examples such as Kwan Man-ching's *Resistance* (*Dikang* 抵抗, 1936), the Tianyi Company's *Patriotic Flower* (*Aiguohua* 愛國花, 1936), and Joseph Sunn Jue's *New Army Force* (*Shenglijun* 生力軍, 1936).[121]

To promote *Heartaches*, also a patriotic film, and to seek opportunities for further productions, Eng arrived in Hong Kong in June 1936. In a welcome party held by the local media, Eng introduced, in fluent Cantonese, the making of *Heartaches*. She explained her engagement in filmmaking in the US: "while living in the U.S., I realized the reduction of the screening of Chinese films in Chinatowns. Therefore, I wanted to promote the national film in a foreign country. Since living in America, I might be ignorant of Chinese viewers' tastes, but I hope to make films which can interest the local audiences (in Hong Kong)."[122] Eng's modest demeanour and her double-

[120] Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong*, 57.
[121] Zhao Weifang 趙衛防, "Ershi shiji san sishi niandai de Xianggang kangzhan dianying ji chenfu fansi"20 世紀三四十年代的香港抗戰電影及沉浮反思 [Anti-War Films in Hong Kong from the 1930s to the 1940s and Reflections on Its Ups and Downs], *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影 5 (2016): 112-117.
[122] S. Louisa Wei, "She Wears Slacks," 110-144.

identity as a patriot overseas and a Hollywood producer made a good impression among the presenters and later in the Hong Kong film industry. The patriotic film *Heartaches* earned a successful reception in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Singapore.

The popularity of patriotic films in Hong Kong in 1936 and 1937 influenced Esther Eng's choice of her next project. After the promotion of *Heartaches*, Eng remained in Hong Kong, where she registered the branch of the Kwong Ngai Talking Pictures Company. At twenty-two Eng directed her first film *National Heroine* (*Minzu nüyingxiong* 民族女英雄, 1937), which premiered in March 1937. As its title indicated, *National Heroine* was also a patriotic film, again starring Wei Kim-fong. It portrays a young female pilot who enrolled in the military to defend the country. The film's call for national defense coincided with China's acute political situation. Four months later, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937 signaled the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). With full-scale war in the north of China, Hong Kong cinema temporarily became the harbor for exiled filmmakers from Shanghai and other northern cities. Patriotic films bloomed under the banner of national defense.[123]

As a diasporic filmmaker working in Hong Kong during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Esther Eng was a pioneer in making patriotic films. Her work showcased the lives of Chinese expatriates living overseas and how they were influenced by the warfare in China. In *Heartaches*, the female protagonist was depicted as a notable opera singer in Chinatown's stage who sacrificed her life for her lover's patriotic mission. Eng's patriotic interest continued in *National Heroine*, which highlighted the independent "New Woman." In the 1930s there were two images of the modern woman: one that is politically aware, patriotic, independent and educated and the other

[123] Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 67.

one that is fashionable and desirable.[124] Eng chose her female protagonist in *National Heroine* from the first type: a female pilot who joined the army and defended the nation. In the 1920s and 1930s, images of female aviators were prominent in the media worldwide. Eng presented the female pilot as a new and patriotic role model who fit quite naturally alongside several other famous pioneer female aviators such as Amelia Earhart and Hazel Ying Lee 李月英.

For the next film Eng collaborated with Joseph Sunn Jue, her fellow San Francisco colleague who had moved his Grandview Film Company to Hong Kong in 1935. Their work resulted in *Hundred Thousand Lovers* (*Shiwan qingren* 十萬情人, 1938), a film depicting a young man caught in a dilemma between his wife and his lover, who was the daughter of a tycoon. The love triangle ended when the couple reunited and returned to the countryside. This melodrama advocated traditional moral principles in marriage and life choice. Tangled in an extramarital affair, Eng presented the male protagonist as powerless and dissipated while the female characters were multilayered and active in love and life.

Eng's next two films, *Tragic Love* (*Duhua fengyu* 妒花風雨, 1938) and *A Night of Romance, A Lifetime of Regret* (*Yiye fuqi* 一夜夫妻, 1938), were also melodramas about familial ethics such as ill-fated love affairs and troubled marriages. Eng's final film made in Hong Kong was *It's a Women's World* (*Nüren shijie* 女人世界, 1939). It is "Hong Kong's first all-female film," thirty-six film stars starring in a range of social positions in contemporary Hong Kong.[125] The characters included multiple kinds of urban occupations: "an old-fashioned teacher, a fashionably dressed secretary, a clever journalist, a conscientious lawyer, a compassionate doctor, a free-spirited

[124] Xiying Wang, *Gender, Dating and Violence in Urban China* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 35.
[125] Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 67.

nightclub hostess, decadent socialite, an unlucky divorcee, and so on."[126] Esther Eng in total made five films during her stay in Hong Kong from June 1936 to October 1939, which was the peak of her creative filmmaking career. Eng's filmmaking in Hong Kong, however, ceased suddenly because of the local political emergency at the end of 1939, during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War. As a British colony Hong Kong lost its temporary neutral status and had to face a determined Japanese attack. The worsening situation interrupted Eng's filmmaking activities in Hong Kong. In October 1939, at the urging of her family, Eng returned to San Francisco.

While her films explored different themes including patriotism, family melodrama, and urban women, Eng's productions in Hong Kong always concerned the "hyphenated" experience of Chinese-American communities.[127] In *Heartaches* and *National Heroine*, she presented theatre culture and immigrants' daily lives in the form of love stories or national defense stories set in San Francisco's Chinatown. *Tragic Love* and *A Night of Romance, A Lifetime of Regret* dealt with familial affairs, which reflected the dominant status of family melodrama in the Shanghai and Hong Kong film industries. While William Guynn has argued that most diasporic cultural forms express the experience of marginality,[128] Esther Eng, as her film show, took advantage of "the experience of marginality" and her diasporic experience to produce films that blended China and the US as well as tradition and novelty.

2.5 Esther Eng's Filmmaking in Wartime America

[126] Law Kar, "In Search of Esther Eng: Border-crossing Pioneer in Chinese-language Filmmaking," in *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts*, ed., Lingzhen Wang (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 319.
[127] William Guynn, "Critical Dictionary," in *The Routledge Companion to Film History*, ed., William Guynn (New York: Routledge, 2011), 165.
[128] Ibid.

After returning to San Francisco, Eng stayed in contact with the Hong Kong media and friends in the Hong Kong movie industry. In a letter she wrote to the editor of the Hong Kong newspaper *Ling Sing* 伶星 in 1940, for instance, Eng described her latest visit to Hollywood film studios. She expressed her interest in Hollywood's B-movie system.[129] The term "B-movie" refers a low budget film shown as part of a double bill alongside a major studio release. Eng's interest was partly due to the Depression-era innovations, with filmmakers having to work harder to maintain an audience. Their short production period, low budgets, and flexible styles could accommodate creative and commercial concerns in Hong Kong cinema, and Eng recommended that her Hong Kong colleagues borrow this Hollywood B-movie production system.[130] Compared to those in Hong Kong, living in San Francisco was a geographic advantage for Chinese American filmmakers such as Esther Eng who visited and learned from Hollywood. She foresaw the potential of Hong Kong's internalization of Hollywood's B-movie production system. In the 1950s and 1960s, the "martial art-house" films that prevailed in Hong Kong were an adaptation of that system.[131]

Esther Eng also continued to make films in the US with other diasporic Chinese filmmakers. As soon as she returned to the US in 1939, Eng teamed up with two of her working partners in Hong Kong, Joseph Sunn Jue and Kwan Man-ching, on producing *Golden Gate Girl* in 1941. The film represents the collaborative work of Chinese American filmmakers and also the exile of Hong Kong filmmakers in wartime America. In this film, Eng and Kwan were credited as directors and Jue as the cinematographer. Kwan also wrote the script. As the title suggests, the story of *Golden Gate Girl* takes place in San Francisco and tells an immigrant saga of three generations living within diasporic communities. A San Francisco-born Chinese girl falls in love with a Cantonese

[129] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39.
[130] Law Kar, "In Search of Esther Eng," 321.
[131] A typical example is The Shaw Brothers's film production system in the 1960s. See Poshek Fu, ed., *China Forever* (2008).

opera performer. Despite her father's objection, she marries the man and then dies in childbirth. Adopted by two former employees of her grandfather, Lulu 露露, the daughter, grows up and eventually reconciles with her grandfather. In a poster of *Golden Gate Girl*, the description of this film is "a correct ideology and touching plot."[132] As an American critic wrote, "The story is easy to follow and is loaded with familiar scenes around Frisco, particularly Chinatown, but also the Waterfront, Golden Gate Park, etc. Story has been nicely worked out, with plenty of comedy touch."[133]

In her feature-length documentary of Esther Eng, S. Louisa Wei incorporated several film clips of *Golden Gate Girl*.[134] The scenes in the clips reflect local daily Chinese lives in Chinatown. To raise a baby girl, two employees start a laundry, a typical business in Chinatown. In a scene of Lulu's grown-up environment, she mischievously sprays water from a laundry kettle on the face of her foster father to wake him up as he sleeps beside an ironing board. Awoken by Lulu, the father asks with a drowsy look, "What's up?" Lulu replies breezily, "What? How about time for yum cha?" Yum cha, which means having dim sum with a good pot of tea as breakfast, is characteristically Cantonese. In Chinatown, the alternate expression of having breakfast and the Cantonese lifestyle remained after generations. In another scene, stirred by a patriotic performance in which Lulu participates to raise money for the anti-Japanese war in China, the grandfather, who is in the audience of the show, stands up from his chair and donates 3,000 dollars. In the film, the fundraising campaign Lulu is attending is the Bowl of Rice Movement initiated by Madame Sun Yat-sen (Song Qingling 宋慶齡) and her friends around the world for the anti-Japanese resistance

[132] Wei, *Xiage chuanqi*, 124.
[133] Wern, "*Golden Gate Girl*: U.S.-Made Chinese Film," review of *Golden Gate Girl*, directed by Esther Eng, *Variety*, 28 May 1941.
[134] The film clips of *Golden Gate Girl* appear in Wei, *Golden Gate Girls*, ~42:00.

in China. Joseph Sunn Jue recorded the grand movement in San Francisco and his footage was later included in *Golden Gate Girl* as part of the film.[135]

Golden Gate Girl epitomized Chinese American lives in wartime America. The message of this film is to urge Chinese people in China and beyond to unite to defend the nation. The escalation of World War II in the Pacific, especially the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945, impeded the careers of many filmmakers in Hong Kong cinema including Esther Eng, Joseph Sunn Jue, and Kwan Man-ching. They fled to the US for temporary shelter in wartime. To sustain the local diasporic needs for Chinese films and to provide products for future transnational release, the diasporic filmmakers, including exiled Hong Kong filmmakers, continued to make films within local settings.[136] At the same time, the theme of films and propaganda reflected transnational anti-war sentiments. Although Esther Eng worked with Hollywood personnel and rented a studio there, she never made films in the major Hollywood studios. Eng's insight was perhaps a wider film world.

Besides making films in San Francisco, Esther Eng also worked hard to distribute films in the Chinese diaspora from 1939 to 1946. During this time, she continued his father's film import and distribution business in Cuba and Peru by buying more than forty Cantonese films and distributing them to cinemas throughout North and South Americas. In Havana, a local newspaper reported her arrival and meeting with local theatre manager about distributing Cantonese productions.[137] Although she had to leave Hong Kong during the war, her connection with Hong Kong cinema

[135] This film also includes Bruce Lee 李小龍's screen debut in which he plays the part of a baby girl. His father, Lee Hoi-chun 李海泉, a famous Cantonese opera performer, was touring in America.
[136] Joseph Sunn Jue also returned to San Francisco in 1939 and made several colour feature films in San Francisco's Chinatown. In 1940, he established the movie theatre Grandview in San Francisco. For the next five years until its re-establishment in postwar Hong Kong, Grandview continued in San Francisco and temporarily turned the US's oldest Chinatown into the world's Cantonese film capital. See more in Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 80-87.
[137] Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 100.

was never cut off. Eng brought Hong Kong films made before the Japanese occupation to diasporic communities along the Pacific Rim. When Esther's father died shortly after the end of war, Eng took over his film distribution business and travelled around the cities where there were Chinese communities. During her stay in the US and other regions, she kept looking for filmmaking opportunities and Hong Kong remained her first choice.

It is interesting to observe Eng's American filmmaking and transnational cinematic activities when she stayed in San Francisco from 1939 to 1946. The war made San Francisco the hub of many exiled filmmakers, opera stars, capitals, and locations for making Cantonese talkies. As the war continued in China and Southeast Asia, the audience from Chinese communities along the Pacific could only expect new film productions from San Francisco when Hong Kong and Shanghai cinemas were hampered by continuing warfare. As reporter Betty Cornelius commented,

> Thousands que [sic] daily to wait for hours in Hong Kong and other Chinese cities fortunate enough to possess moving-picture houses to see the one new Chinese picture filmed since the war. Prewar films shown repeatedly were learned by heart, and the Chinese, eager for fresh entertainment, have been crowding theatres to see "Golden Gate Girl."[138]

Making use of American studios and Cantonese opera and film talent, diasporic filmmakers like Esther Eng and Joseph Sunn Jue produced films and documentaries to cater to Chinese diasporic audience around the world. A mixed cultural background that juxtaposed both Hollywood film and traditional Chinese stage performance characterized the diasporic films from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s. Politically, the changes in world politics at that time directly affected the diasporic figures in the film industry.

[138] Betty Cornelius, "Esther Eng, Movie Maker, Visits Here," *Seattle Times*, 9 June 1946.

2.6 Esther Eng's Post-War Filmmaking in Hong Kong and the US

When World War II ended in 1945, Esther Eng finally saw the possibility of resuming her career in Hong Kong. She went there for the second time in September 1946. According to S. Louisa Wei, Eng brought with her 40,000 feet of film, a rare and valuable commodity in postwar Hong Kong.[139] She was, however, soon disappointed because the Hong Kong cinema was far from recovery. The studios and facilities were destroyed and the personnel still in exile and disbursed throughout the diaspora. The cost of film production was therefore three times higher than Hollywood.[140] Eng planned to return the US to make new films after staying in Hong Kong for a week, but a strike by American sailors, however, disrupted her plan of leaving by ship. Unable to leave on a short timeline, Eng met the famous director Wu Peng 胡鵬, with whom she cooperated during her first visit to Hong Kong. They began the film project temporarily titled *Guerrilla Heroes*, which was about guerrilla resistance in the Guangdong-Hong Kong region during the war. For the project she met veterans, raised funds from the Nanyang Film Company (hereafter Nanyang), commissioned a scriptwriter, and even postponed her return to the US. Yet, when the shooting was about to start in early 1947, Nanyang canceled the project for unknown reasons. Meanwhile, the Chinese civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist camps was ongoing. Witnessing the turbulent sociopolitical environment as well as the slow recovery in the Hong Kong cinema, Eng decided to leave without make a single film during her second stopover in Hong Kong. Before her departure Eng bought the US distribution rights of about twenty films from Nanyang.[141]

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[139] Wei, *Xiage chuanqi*, 141.
[140] For a discussion on the recovery of the Hong Kong cinema after the war, see Su Tao 蘇濤, *Fucheng beiwang: Chonghui zhanhou Xianggang dianying* 浮城北望:重繪戰後香港電影 [Looking North from a Floating City: Reconstructing the Postwar Hong Kong Cinema] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2014).
[141] Wei, *Xiage chuanqi*, 158.

In February 1947, Eng returned to San Francisco and directed *Lady from the Blue Lagoon* (*Lanhu biyu* 藍湖碧玉, 1947) for Joseph Sunn Jue's Grandview Film Company. She also went to South America to distribute films for Nanyang.[142] In early 1948, Eng began directing the colour film *Back Street* (*Xüdu chunxiao* 虛度春宵, 1948) and released it through her own film company, the Golden Gate Silver Light Production. *Back Street* was an adaptation of Fannie Hurst's 1931 bestseller and the protagonists were Chinese American. Eng was by then an independent filmmaker who self-financed the production. The conditions in the US for filmmaking were far better than those in war-torn Hong Kong. With adequate money, equipment, cast, and audiences in Chinatowns, Eng maximized the strengths of the US filmmaking environment and resumed Cantonese filmmaking in the US.

Eng continued to travel to different Chinese diasporic communities. On 10 July 1948, she boarded a passenger liner to Hong Kong. Two weeks later, when she arrived at Honolulu, the local Chinese community invited her to make films about local Chinese lives in Hawai'i. Eng thus worked in Hawai'i for three months and produced *Mad Fire, Mad Love* (*Nühuo qingyan* 怒火情焰, 1948), which exemplifies the close relationship between Eng as a Chinese American director and the diasporic Chinese audience of her films.[143]

For unknown reasons, Eng never resumed her travel to Hong Kong after the making of *Mad Fire, Mad Love*. In the following years, she retired from the film circles and opened restaurants in New York. The last film in which Eng participated was *Murder in New York Chinatown* (1961).

[142] The Nanyang Film Company was the successor to the Shaw Brothers' Tianyi Film Company and was founded in circa 1936. See Stephanie Po-yin Chung, "Moguls of the Chinese Cinema: The Story of the Shaw Brothers in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, 1924-2002," *Modern Asian Studies*, 41.4 (2007): 665-682.
[143] See more in S. Louisa Wei's interview with a local Chinese American who had witnessed the production of *Mad Fire, Mad Love* in Wei, *Golden Gate Girls*.

Doing a favour to Fung Yin-fei 馮燕飛 (alias Siu Yin-fei 小燕飛), her friend in Hong Kong who was a movie star and the film's producer, Eng wrote the screenplay and shot some materials. The film project was later transferred to Wu Peng as the director and Eng was credited as the "location director" of the film. The film was a transnational collaboration between the two directors. In S. Louisa Wei's documentary *Golden Gate Girls*, she shows how Esther Eng told a thrilling story based on a real murder case at the Chinatown in New York. Beginning with sightseeing-like shots of several landmarks of different American cities such as New York's skyscrapers, San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, and Niagara Falls, the camera slowly guides the audience to the New York Chinatown where the story takes place. In shots of the protagonists' lives in Chinatown there are many local Chinese elements, including a laundry, restaurant, lion dances, and traditional theatres. There is a play-within-a-play in the film when the hero and the heroine watch a Cantonese opera performance. An ancient high-ranking official played by a young actor is singing: "my love for you has disappeared like smoke, I owe a lot to my princess wife. A despised woman like you has no place in this Forbidden City. Get out. Get out of here! Guard, throw them out! 舊愛已如煙夢散，公主情誼重如山，禁苑不容你種賤人戀棧。滾，你滾出去！人來，趕佢哋走！" This performance in the film is a selection of the classic Chinese opera "Mei's Beheading Case." The opera's leading character Chen Shimei 陳世美 is a byword for a heartless man and unfaithful husband in the Chinese world. In *Murder in New York Chinatown*, the male protagonist is also unfaithful to his wife and kills her in the end. Directors Wu Peng and Esther Eng skillfully combined Cantonese opera and the reality in Chinatown and demonstrated the similarities of these tragedies across the diaspora.

Esther Eng's postwar-era films were quite different from her films made in Hong Kong. Unlike her major studio productions in Hong Kong, Eng's films made in the US were on a limited

budget. With a smaller cast and crew, the projects were more independent and mobile. There were many location scenes, not made in studio but outdoors. Eng's preference in Hollywood B-movies not only helped achieve an efficient shooting process but also worked toward realistic subjects. For example, *Murder in New York Chinatown*, the last film of Eng released in 1961, drew inspirations from crime and detective film genres that were then popular in Hollywood. Besides Esther Eng, Joseph Jue and his Grandview Film Company produced about twenty Chinese-language feature films in the US from 1939 to 1945. Most of them are melodramas, comedies, and love stories set in the US and stories about Chinese American daily lives such as marriage and romantic love. All the characters wear Western-style clothes as the actors and actresses do in their real lives in the US. However, the characters all speak in the Cantonese dialect and are sometimes portrayed as Cantonese opera troupe members. They often talked about China while living in the US. Therefore, these films represented "the lives of Chinese living in America," including the filmmakers themselves.[144]

Diasporic cinema, as William Safran noted, "embodies the notion of the diasporic triangular relationship between the myth of motherland, the identities of 'foreignness' and 'difference,' and the host country."[145] Esther Eng's cross-border cinematic activities exemplify this. Like its precedent Cantonese opera, Chinese diasporic cinema emerged from the experience of displacement from their native homeland and enabled Eng to "develop and act in an increasingly transnational environment of media production, distribution, and consumption."[146] Individual filmmakers like Esther Eng moved "among ethnic communities located 'inside,' 'outside,'

[144] Kar and Bren, "Hong Kong Cinema," 83.
[145] William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora*, 1 (1991): 83-84.
[146] Kin-Yan Szeto, *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2011), 7.

'between,' or 'beyond' national boundaries," displaying characteristics of diasporic cinema.[147] Moreover, the intimacy of homeland (i.e. US Chinatowns), a nostalgia for the motherland (i.e. South China), and the experience of exile in warfare shaped ethnic cultural identification within the specific Chinese diasporic group. The national crisis in China from the 1930s to World War II accelerated inter-flows of people, ideology, capital, and culture among the Chinese communities. In the field of film industry, diasporic filmmakers and their works represented "the entwinement between the transnational and the national and its complex political trappings."[148]

With the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, many exiled Chinese filmmakers and cultural figures (such as Cantonese opera performers) in the US returned to mainland China and Hong Kong. The loss of so many talented personnel devastated diasporic filmmaking culture in the US. In addition, the uncertainty about the postwar geopolitical environment rose among American Chinese and replaced the once shared wartime patriotism.

Conclusion

Since the nineteenth century, well before the invention of the motion picture, Cantonese opera played the role of cultural ambassador, bringing a community feeling and cultural nourishment from the homeland to Chinese communities abroad. When Cantonese sound pictures emerged in the early 1930s, they strengthened the cultural and interpersonal networks previously sustained by Cantonese opera. In the early 1930s, increased nationalism among immigrants in North America stirred their initiative to make films, especially patriotic films. Transnational film figures like Esther Eng, Kwan Man-ching, and Joseph Sunn Jue traversed between Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Singapore, North America, and other parts of Chinese diasporic communities. The

[147] Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 19.
[148] Weihong Bao and Nathaniel Brennan, "Cinema, Propaganda, and Networks of Experience: Exhibiting Chongqing Cinema in New York," in *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, ed., Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2015), 120.

cross-border cooperation in making transnational Cantonese talkies not only meant surpassing nation-state borders, but also evolving with inter-flows of personnel (Chinese immigrants, filmmakers, and opera performers), capital from patrons of opera theatres and film companies, techniques such as gramophone records, sound and colour film, and culture (traditional stage opera art and Hollywood film). Political chaos in China, the diasporic identities of cast and crew, the transformation from the old stage to the new screen, and the fusion between West (Hollywood) and East (Chinese opera) all complicated the vibrant picture of the transnational Cantonese filmmaking. These qualities contributed to the communication and collaboration across borders between Hong Kong, South China, Shanghai, Southeast Asia, San Francisco, and Hollywood.

As a San Francisco-born Chinese, Esther Eng was raised in a mixed cultural environment with both Hollywood films and traditional Chinatown stage performances. This mixture of cultures is reflected in her film career. Eng's close relation to the opera troupe and her knowledge of the stage, playwriting, and theatre management enabled her to make Cantonese films with appealing stories. Meanwhile, claiming the title of "Hollywood director" facilitated her filmmaking in Hong Kong. Eng's story is thus an example of how to integrate diasporic lives into the larger story of the Chinese cinema. Supported by well-resourced diasporic film companies such as Grandview and Nanyang, Eng represents a trajectory of cross-cultural exchange between the Hong Kong cinema and the Chinese diaspora from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Eng's transnational movements demonstrate the constantly changing geopolitical contours for Chinese filmmaking during wartime. Influenced by the advance of Japanese military forces in North China after 1937, filmmakers in the multi-local cinematic network connecting Shanghai, Hong Kong, and San Francisco assembled in Hong Kong. When the war was at its height and Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese, San Francisco successively became a major shelter for

many refugee Chinese filmmakers. This shift of location reminds us that because of the Second Sino-Japanese War, a multi-locational cinema replaced the previous Shanghai-based cinema and actively negotiated with wartime politics across the borders. It also demonstrates the influence of larger geopolitical events in shaping the influence of various places within the diasporic film community. With the rise of the Cold War, the discontinuity between China and western countries reshuffled Chinese cinematic network and precipitated many diasporic filmmakers' careers including Esther Eng.

Although Eng's films never entered mainstream Hollywood cinema, she and other Chinese immigrants fulfilled their dreams of making films across the US and China. Targeting a larger diasporic market in North America and Southeast Asia, these filmmakers bridged and expanded the map of the Chinese cinema, forming transnational networks of cinematic culture.

Chapter 3

Between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia: Transnational Chinese Filmmaking in the 1950s

Introduction

In 1955, employed by Kong Ngee 光藝 (Guangyi) Motion Picture Production Company, a group of Hong Kong filmmakers came to Singapore and Malaya to produce Chinese films.[149] In about six weeks, they completed the pre-production of three Cantonese films: *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* (*Xueran Xiangsigu* 血染相思谷, 1957), *China Wife* (*Tangshan Ashao* 唐山阿嫂, 1957) and *Moon over Malaya (Yelinyue* 椰林月, 1957). Dealing with familial conflicts and romantic relationship between people from China and Nanyang, the three films, known as the "Nanyang (Southeast Asia) Trilogy 南洋三部曲," became a box-office smash in both Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.[150] Chan Man 陳文 (1924-2012), then the manager of Kong Ngee and the director of *China Wife*, mentioned that in 1956, after several Hong Kong films posted only mediocre results, he and Chun Kim 秦劍 (1926-1969) (the general manager of Kong Ngee) decided to try their luck elsewhere. "The way we regarded the market was like this: Hong Kong was too small a pond, we needed to swim out to the ocean. The Nanyang was the biggest market at that time, so off we went to Singapore."[151] The Nanyang Trilogy's box office success in both Hong

[149] "Kong Ngee" and "Kwong Ngai" are respectively the Hakka and Cantonese pronunciation of "Guangyi 光藝". The first generation of the founders of the company, Ho's family were Hakka migrants from China to Singapore.

[150] Long before "Southeast Asia" become the common descriptor during and after World War II, Chinese maritime traders had used "Nanyang" to refer to the key coastal areas of the mainland and most of the islands of Indonesia, British Borneo, and the Philippines. It was the name for territories accessible to the Chinese traders through the South China Sea. In this chapter, I adopt the narrow meaning of "Nanyang" to specifically refer to Singapore and Malaya for the films and cinematic activities occurring mostly in Singapore and Malaya. For background discussion, see Wang Gungwu, *A Short Story of The Nanyang Chinese* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1959); and Chong Guan Kwa and Bak Lim Kua, eds., *A General History of The Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific Publication, 2019).

[151] Donna Chu, "Oral History: Chan Man," in *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong

Kong and the Singapore-Malaya regions proved Kong Ngee's southern strategy was the right decision. The success of the Nanyang Trilogy reflected an intimacy between Hong Kong cinema and its counterpart in Southeast Asia in the 1950s.

Political changes in and around China during the 1950s caused a southbound diversion of Chinese filmmaking, and an increasingly close interrelationship between film industries in Hong Kong film and Southeast Asia. In 1949, the Communist victory virtually isolated mainland China from the rest of the world. Consequently, cinematic exchanges including importation, exportation and circulation, between Shanghai and Hong Kong, San Francisco, Singapore ceased in general.[152] For the Hong Kong film industry, the closure of the mainland market was disastrous.[153] With an average output of two hundred films per year in the 1950s, Hong Kong itself was too small to be a film market.[154] To survive in increasingly severe business conditions, many Hong Kong film companies, while trying to increase their market share in Hong Kong, shifted their target market to the diasporic Chinese community in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, Singapore and Malay cinema was experiencing a fast rebuilding after World War II, with an increasing number of cinemas circuits and filmmaking companies. Although Hollywood and Malayan films enjoyed the most popularity among the local audience, Chinese films also had a considerably a large audience. Therefore, when the import of Shanghai films was reduced drastically after 1949, the shortage of Chinese films for screening in Singapore and Malaya became the biggest concern of local distributors and exhibitors. To ensure a steady source

Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006), 193.

152 After 1949, only one or two left-wing Hong Kong film companies, such as Changcheng 長城 (Great Wall), could continue to distribute Hong Kong-made films to the mainland.

153 Hong Kong had served as a comparatively safe and convenient film production site in the 1930s and 1940s. Many Shanghai film companies such as Tianyi and Lianhua opened branches in Hong Kong and made mandarin films for the mainland (particularly Shanghai) market.

154 Ian Charles Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: A Sociological Study of the Hong Kong Film Industry and Its Audience* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1977), 129.

of films for their cinema circuits, some Singapore film companies embarked on filmmaking ventures in Hong Kong. The most well-known examples were The Shaw Brothers 邵氏兄弟, Cathay Organization 國泰 and Kong Ngee. All based in Singapore and owned by Chinese families, the three Singaporean film distribution moguls started to build their filmmaking arms in Hong Kong in the mid-1950s, witnessing how the Southeast Asian Chinese took charge of film production in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s.

In previous chapters, by observing the transnational filmmaking experiences of different filmmakers such as opera singers Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian, and the Chinese American directors Esther Eng and Joseph Sunn Jue, I outlined a triangular network of transnational Chinese filmmaking centered in Shanghai, Hong Kong and San Francisco in the first half of the twentieth century. The center core of the filmic triangle kept changing due to the geopolitical situation in and around China before and during the Second World War. For example, the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1937 endangered Shanghai cinema and drained its talents who fled southward and to other inland regions. When Hong Kong was occupied in 1941, filmmakers again fled to North America and Southeast Asia.

This chapter follows this vein by adding another region – Singapore and Malaya – to draw a more complete map of transnational Chinese cinema in the postwar era. After the communist takeover of the mainland in 1949, the political situation broke the cinematic link between Hong Kong and mainland China and drove it closer to Southeast Asia. In the 1950s and 1960s, with its close interactions with capitals and markets in Singapore and Malaya, Hong Kong replaced Shanghai and became a new center for Chinese filmmaking. This chapter particularly looks at the Hong Kong-Southeast Asia cinematic interconnection in the 1950s when this link was at its prime. Compared with the 1930s and 1940s Shanghai-Hong Kong nexus and the Hong Kong-San

Francisco nexus I mentioned previously, this Hong Kong-Southeast nexus was in a larger industrial scale, reflecting the complex interactions among political propaganda, overseas audiences, and the popularity of Chinese-dialect films in Cold War Asia. At the heart of this industrial interaction was a body of transnational film companies and their films which was produced, distributed and exhibited in the two regions.

Although I there were several major film companies, I will focus on Kong Ngee and analyze its strategies in managing transnational filmmaking and its representation of overseas Chinese lives in its "Nanyang Trilogy." Kong Ngee is particularly important in this discussion for two reasons. Firstly, this film company enables us to look at both Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaya cinemas in a larger transnational extent. As a Hong Kong film company with a Singapore background, Kong Ngee participated in every stage of the filmmaking process, from production to distribution to exhibition. This so-called "vertical integration" management mode helps us understand the transformations in business infrastructure, market structure, and production strategies of the postwar film industry.[155] Secondly, Kong Ngee was a unique case in the discourse of the rise and fall of Cantonese cinema. Focusing on producing Cantonese films, Kong Ngee particularly targeted transnational Cantonese-speaking communities from the very beginning. Exploring Kong Ngee's Cantonese films could give us a better insight into the golden era of Cantonese filmmaking in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, that is from the mid-1950s to the end of 1960s.

Therefore, by making use of Kong Ngee as a case study, this chapter aims to show a Hong Kong-Southeast Asia nexus at the industrial level. Since much research has focused on the Big Two Hong Kong film moguls with Singapore background: the Shaw Brothers and Cathay, my research on Kong Ngee adds an additional element in understanding this complex landscape of the

[155] Vertical integration is an economic term that means a company management structure that combines different stages of the production process and supply chain into a single business.

Hong Kong-Southeast Asia filmmaking nexus.[156] I will particularly examine Kong Ngee's films as cultural texts for how they exemplify the ethnic and cultural liaison between Hong Kong and Nanyang. In other words, I specifically examine how Kong Ngee presented Chinese lives in Southeast Asia in terms of linguistic and ethnic factors. By doing so, I show how Hong Kong filmmakers maintained Cantonese filmmaking traditions by responding to the audiences in diasporic Chinese communities in both Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

By unveiling the Hong Kong-Nanyang nexus in the 1950s and 1960s, I argue that Hong Kong and Singapore constituted a vibrant diasporic Chinese filmmaking network. During the time, despites the volatility of Cold War politics, Hong Kong cinema developed from being a peripheral part of Chinese national cinema to functioning as a hub of Chinese diasporic cinema from the mid-1950s. On the other hand, Singapore-Malaya served not only as a passive target market for its predominant Chinese population, but also a decisive counterpart that provided capital, personnel, and stories for the Hong Kong film industry. The intensive cinematic interactions between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia contested and complicated the conventions of national cinema. Moreover, the films circulating in the Hong Kong-Nanyang nexus reflected ethnic kinship and mental connection which underlined the diasporic Chinese filmmaking.

3.1 Literature Review

In the introduction I have discusssed "Chinese cinema" in terms of scholarship using a national cinema paradigm, and that using a transnational or diasporic paradigm. Because this chapter particularly concerns Chinese filmmaking between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, I will briefly review studies that are particularly related to this filmic link. Although most scholars admit

[156] Stephanie Chung Po-yin, "The Story of Kong Ngee: The Southeast Asian Cinema Circuit and Hong Kong's Cantonese Film Industry," in *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009), 122.

its significance, the Hong Kong-Nanyang filmmaking interaction in the 1950s and 1960s is still under-studied. Compared with a multitude of studies on Hong Kong's filmic liaison with its counterparts within Great China such as the one in Shanghai and Taiwan, studies on Hong Kong's transnational cinema are much fewer.[157] The reason has been the predominant national cinema paradigm in Chinese film studies, which easily neglects transnational filmmaking beyond the national political borders. Moreover, the national cinema paradigm particularly concerns filmmaking activities related to the building of one single nation-state cinema and ignores the reciprocal influence between industries in different nations. For example, In *Celluloid Singapore Performance and the National*, Edna Lin considered films produced by Singapore production companies, but featured a narrative in Hong Kong, "has nothing to do with Singapore at all."[158] Similarly, many scholars excluded Singapore from the studies of Hong Kong cinema for its passive status as a market. Many studies consider the well-known Shaw Brothers Hong Kong film company as a specifically Hong Kong company, despite the fact that it was headquartered in Singapore beginning in the 1930s.

To challenge the national cinema paradigm, some scholars have applied a transnational and diasporic paradigm to emphasize the multiculturalism and multilingualism in the place-based cultural and social practices of Sinitic-language communities beyond mainland China. For example, by situating Hong Kong cinema parallel to the development of the national cinema in Singapore during the 1950s and 60s, Grace Mak analyzed the geo-political context and critical interpretations of films made by Cathay and Kong Ngee in her monography *Hong Kong Films and*

[157] For studies concerning translocal interactions between Shanghai, Taiwan and Hong Kong, see Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003); Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, ed. *Kaleidoscopic Histories: Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2018); Shuk-ting Yau, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
[158] Edna Lin, *Celluloid Singapore Performance and the National* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 8.

Singapore: The Hong Kong-Singapore Cultural Connection in Cold War, 1950-1965. She pioneered in emphasizing Singapore's active role in this cinematic connection and demonstrated how a Sinophone cultural rim developed between Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaya under the umbrella of British colonialism in the context of Cold War. Similarly, in *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema*, Jingjing Chang discussed the diasporic ties and cultural diplomacy between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia cinemas in the Cold War period, emphasizing the cultural and social impact of the film products produced in both regions.

Following Chang and Mak, I adopt the transnational and diasporic perspectives to observe and narrate the story of the transnational film company Kong Ngee. I stress that being at the center of the Hong Kong-Nanyang film industries nexus, transnational film companies such as Kong Ngee acted as an active historical agent. They dealt with not only cross-border location shooting, but also collective film financing, and negotiated with the multiple languages spoken in the film and the nationalities or ethnicity of its Southeast Asian audiences. In the process, it sheds light on the conception of transnational Chinese cinema as well as diasporic Chinese cinema in the Cold War era. Compared with the prevailing patriotic films that dominated screens during wartime, many Hong Kong film companies like Kong Ngee adopted an apolitical approach and made films in a cross-border business model. Their films in both content and production allow us to reconfirm the geographic, social and theoretical margins of "China" and "Chineseness."

3.2 Kong Ngee and The Hong Kong Film Industry in the 1950s

3.2.1 A Brief Introduction of Kong Ngee

Hong Kong gradually lost the mainland market after the 1949. In 1952, the British Government's restrictions on freedom of movement between the colony and the mainland further

disrupted the connection between the Hong Kong film industry and its counterparts in Canton and Shanghai. Meanwhile, after 1949, the Southeast Asian Chinese no longer obtained films from Shanghai, which forced them to rely on the Hong Kong film industry for products. As market demands increased, they became directly involved with Hong Kong film production. From 1955 to 1957, three film moguls emerged from Singapore and embarked on filmmaking in Hong Kong. They were The Shaw Brothers, Cathay Organization and Kong Ngee. Building studios, hiring technicians and adopting Hollywood's industrial model of "vertical integration" (a combination of production, distribution and exhibition), the establishment of the three companies signaled a new era of Hong Kong cinema characterized by a "big studios" filmmaking system. In the process, the Southeast Asian Chinese began to replace the influence of the mainland, and took charge of film production in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s.

Among them, Kong Ngee was the first to take the initiative, and it achieved a tremendous success. Kong Ngee Company Limited had its humble beginnings in distributing Shanghai films in 1937 in Southeast Asia. The company then developed to own cinema halls across the region. In 1955, by cooperating with the Hong Kong film directors Chun Kim and Chan Man, the founders of the brothers of Ho Khee-yong 何啟榮 and Ho Khee-siang 何啟湘 made their first foray into filmmaking in Hong Kong, under the Kong Ngee Film Company. Like the Shaw Brothers and Cathay, Kong Ngee set up its production base in Hong Kong at an 80,000-square-foot-studio on Castle Peak Road in Kowloon. With Chun Kim as general manager, Chan Man as production director, and other experienced Hong Kong directors such as Lee Sun-fung 李晨風 and Ng Wui 吳回, Kong Ngee produced more than sixty feature-length films between 1955 to 1969, making it the third biggest film company in Hong Kong. Unlike the "Big Two" (The Shaws and Cathay), which primarily made Mandarin films, Kong Ngee focused on Cantonese film, letting its affiliates

make other Chinese language/dialect productions such as Mandarin, Teochew and Amoy films. This brief history of the Kong Ngee illustrates in broad how it was set up as a vertically integrated, border-crossing, family-based film company. In the next section, I will specifically discuss the geo-political context in which Kong Ngee engaged in making and distribute Cantonese films.

3.2.2 A Leading Cantonese Filmmaking Power

As mentioned earlier, three Singaporean film companies dominated the Hong Kong film industry: the Shaw Brothers, Cathay, and Kong Ngee. Compared to the former two, Kong Ngee was smaller in size. The majority of Kong Ngee's film were made in Cantonese dialect while its rivals mainly produced Mandarin films. Kong Ngee focused on Mandarin films from the very beginning. Behind the different language choices of these major film companies was the antagonistic relation between Cantonese and Mandarin films, and Cold War politics in the Hong Kong film industry.

The history of Hong Kong cinema was the history of Cantonese-language cinema. Since the birth of sound pictures, language on screen swiftly became the most efficient sign with which to divide the audience into camps. One of the earliest attempts to make talkies was the screen adaptation of operas in different dialects (such as Peking opera and Cantonese opera), which turned opera performers into the first film celebrities. Hong Kong had a tradition of dialect filmmaking, especially the production of Cantonese films. From the mid-1930s, it also produced Mandarin films with the migration of film talent from Shanghai due to the disruptions wrought by the civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party and the Japanese invasion.

After the war, the production of Mandarin and Cantonese films ran in tandem. As a local cultural tradition, Cantonese films continued their popularity among Hong Kong audiences, who

were mainly Cantonese speakers. Meanwhile, traditional art forms like Cantonese opera provided the script, stars and songs for the early development of Cantonese opera, just like the relationship between Peking opera and Mandarin films. After the communist takeover of the mainland in 1949, Hong Kong replaced Shanghai and became a new center for Mandarin filmmaking.[159] However, the small scale of the local market and the high location costs forced Hong Kong distributors to look for much bigger markets and resources around the world.

The overseas Chinese communities played a crucial role in the development of Hong Kong's post-war cinema. To sustain a large film industry producing mass quantities of Mandarin and Cantonese films, Hong Kong relied much on the support of the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, North America and other parts of the world. Hong Kong's linguistic affinity with the immigrant Chinese populations provided its film industry with a decided advantage. In this circumstance, films made in Hong Kong were not only in Cantonese and Mandarin, but also in other dialects, such as Amoy, Hokkien, and Teochew. For example, in the 1950s, the Amoy-dialect films were popular in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, taking the third position after Cantonese and Mandarin films.[160]

Since they targeted similar audiences, both local and overseas, it was inevitable that the rivalry between Cantonese and Mandarin cinema in the 1950s became intense. The emphasis of Cantonese cinema in the representation and construction of local Hong Kong identity cast Cantonese films in the role of a popular mass culture serving the lower classes, while Mandarin cinema focused on profiling the middle and upper classes in artistic Mandarin films – especially

[159] Taiwan also became another new hub of Mandarin filmmaking at the same time. In fact, from 1949, the National Party restricted minor language filmmaking (such as the Hokkien and Teochew) to uphold the centrality of Mandarin, which was considered the standard language in Taiwan.
[160] Jeremy E. Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011).

those made between the 1940s and 1960s. Mandarin cinema in Hong Kong promoted a nostalgic link among the overseas communities to the concept of Greater China through the use of Mandarin. For example, Cathay Organization (later as Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd., abbreviated as MP&GI) was famous for its Mandarin films made in the 1950s and 1960s.

Compared with Cantonese cinema, Mandarin cinema was better funded. Financed with capital from Shanghai (The Shaw Brothers) and Southeast Asia (MP&GI), Mandarin filmmaking enjoyed longer production time and popular films stars. For example, in 1959, MP&GI produced a big-budget film, *Air Hostess* (*Kongzhong Xiaojie* 空中小姐, 1959). It was directed by the well-respected scriptwriter and director Yi Wen, who started his career in writing film reviews in wartime Shanghai, and with an impressive cast (Ge Lan 葛蘭, Qiao Hong 喬宏 and Ye Feng 葉楓). The title "*Air Hostess*" indicated the career of the female protagonist and therefore the shooting locations included Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand. It was also one of the first Hong Kong films shot in Eastman color. These high-cost, high-tech production strategies became the selling points of the film. *Air Hostess* represented a trend of Mandarin filmmaking: big-budget film projects with modern themes and transnational locations.

The 1950s witnessed a "mandarinization of Hong Kong cinema," which brought a crisis for Cantonese film.[161] At that time, the mainstream style of Cantonese cinema was called "sweatshop" style, meaning a small budget, and which often duplicated Shanghai and Hollywood films and Chinese operas.[162] "The North-South divide is a substitute for discriminatory class difference between Mandarin cinema and Cantonese cinema. In such view, the former, mostly made by

[161] Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, 71-89.

[162] The local mass media in Hong Kong nicknamed some of these postwar Cantonese films as "*tsat yat sin* 七日鮮" in Cantonese (or *qi ri xian* in Mandarin; literally, seven-day works), because they were completed over production periods that were in some cases as short as a single week. Consequently, many of them were not of high quality.

emigrants from Shanghai, is considered modernized, arty, high-budgeted, and prestigious, whereas the dialect-oriented latter is local, cheap, backward, and provincial-looking."[163] As a result, Cantonese filmmaking needed to catch up with the realities of the modernized city and the changing of its audiences. Yet most Cantonese-language films had a modest budget and mediocre production qualities and aesthetics. Under this circumstance, Kong Ngee embarked on making films with better production qualities and a modern vibe.

At that time, the competition between The Shaws and Cathay was fierce. To target large film markets in Taiwan, Southeast Asia and North America, both companies ventured into Mandarin filmmaking. The exiled filmmakers brought capital from Shanghai, which also contributed to the emerging of Mandarin film in Hong Kong. For example, in 1956, Cathay became a fully-fledged film production company by merging with Yonghua, a major Mandarin filmmaking company from Shanghai. Yonghua's facilities, actors and technicians became a dominant filmmaking power of Cathay. When Cathay and The Shaws were competing in capturing the Mandarin film markets, Kong Ngee sought a different trail by making Cantonese films. At that time, Cantonese filmmaking was in a perilous situation, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, Kong Ngee had to make "new" Cantonese films that were different from the previous low budget "sweatshop" kind of films, and the Nanyang Trilogy was its first attempt.

3.3 Kong Ngee's Nanyang Trilogy

The Nanyang Trilogy is a series of three Cantonese-language films produced by the Kong Ngee Company in 1957. Shot in Singapore and Malaysia, the films are *Blood Stains the Valley of Love*, *China Wife* and *Moon Over Malaya.* The films introduced urban perspectives and youthful

[163] Kwai-cheung Lo, "Hong Kong Cinema as Ethnic Borderland," in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti and Esther C.M. Yau (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 76.

idols of the time, led by Patrick Tse Yin 謝賢, Patsy Kar Ling 嘉玲 and Nam Hung 南紅 that appealed to its younger postwar audiences. The synopsis of the films largely dealt with family relationship and postwar migration from "Tangshan" to "Nanyang," an old route that had existed for centuries. Literally meaning "Southern Ocean/Seas," Chinese had used the term "Nanyang" to refer to Southeast Asia for centuries. In the narrow sense, it refers to Singapore and Malaya. The geographic terms appeared in the film titles "China," "Malaya" and "Nanyang," which indicated ethnicity and transnationalism. The exotic tropical scenery as well as local Chinese society provided a combined appeal to the audiences. Also, the actors and actresses in the trilogy was totally new and with great charisma, attracting many younger moviegoers.[164] The strategy of shooting on off-shore locations and featuring new and attractive actors and actresses reflected the boldness and creativity of Kong Ngee. These three films, by depicting romantic relationship and familial conflicts between characters in Tangshan and Nanyang, presented a borderless mobility and the cultural connections between the two cities/regions in the postwar era.

3.3.1 *Blood Stains the Valley of Love:* Illusion in Interracial Relationship

Adapted from an illustrated serial novel published in Hong Kong local newspapers, *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* told an interracial romance and rivalry. A Chinese man, Yip Ching (Patrick Tse) falls in love with a Malay girl Solina (Molly Wu Kar). However, Ching's mother disapproved of this relationship. When Ching planned to visit his aunt and cousins in Hong Kong, Solina's insecurity caused her to threaten him with a curse. Ching proceeds with his trip to Hong Kong, where he fell in love with his youngest cousin Ah Mei (Nam Hung). Solina's curse then

[164] Grace Mak 麥欣恩, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo: lengzhanshidai xinggangwenhualianxi, 1950-1965* 香港電影與新加坡: 冷戰時代星港文化連繫, 1950-1965 [Hong Kong Cinema and Singapore: Cultural Connection between Hong Kong and Singapore during Cold War] (Hong Kong. Xianggang daxue chubanshe, 2018), 124-126.

appeared to come true in a series of deaths, including Ah Mei's mother, Ah Mei, and her elder sister Ah Yi (Pasty Kar Ling). Yip Ching returned to Malay to confront Solina, now married to Ali (Keung Chung-ping 姜中平). They meet in a valley where Yip attempted to take revenge. However, Ali's appearance made the scene more chaotic and Solina accidentally fell down the valley. Although innocent, Ali was sentenced to imprisonment for murdering Solina. Yip returned to Hong Kong again and accidentally found that Ah Yi planned and carried out the death of her own sister because she herself was in love with Yip. In the end, Yip came back to Malaya and helped release Solina's husband, Ali. In the end, Yip and Ali walk together with their arms on each other's shoulders in a symbolic reflection of a repaired Chinese-Malay brotherhood.

The inter-racial relationship was the subject of the film. There were several scenes which showed details of Malayan culture, such as Malay rural housing where Solina lived, Malayan dancing, and the sarongs Solina and Yip's mother wore. It showcased the integration and acculturation among the two races. On the other hand, the cultural and racial conflicts became obvious when the two protagonists started to distrust each other because of Yip's mother's discriminatory remark about Solina.

The image of the girl Solina was considered typical Malayan: a nyonya costume, a small flower in her hair and tanned skin. In one scene Solina and other Malayan girls were dancing and singing to show their naive and enthusiastic personality. However, on the other side, Solina was depicted as a vicious psychic woman when she found out about her lover's departure. According to Mak, the contradictory images of Solina reflected the Hong Kong filmmakers' imagery towards Southeast Asia.[165] On the one hand, Nanyang was beautiful in natural scenery and modernized in downtown streets; on the other hand, it was mysterious and with unknown powers. As Mak said,

[165] Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 143.

"Hong Kong people project their hidden psychology towards Southeast Asia to the role of Solina. The lake in the very beginning of this film was another token to show this duality. On the one hand, it was quiet and beautiful; on the other hand, it suggested suspense and mystery."[166]

The Malaya location was full of natural scenery, signifying the bright side of the story, while the Hong Kong segment is more gothic. I think this contrast resulted from the director Chun Kim's personal aesthetic taste. As one of the most talented of the Cantonese directors in the 1950s, Chun Lim was good at making films with diverse elements. He did not intentionally differentiate Hong Kong and Nanyang with opposing images, but wanted to make a film that crossed genres. As a result, he blended romance melodrama based on an interracial love story with a thriller-mystery, and then a ghost story and finally a kind of social-conscience film calling for interracial brotherhood.[167] He learned from the ghost and horror trends of Hollywood films in the 1950s but transferred the location to Hong Kong and Malaya.

Besides the inter-racial relationship and the director's blending of various film genres, language was another factor in the film that indicated the intimacy between Hong Kong and Malaya. *Blood Stains The Valley of Love* was a Cantonese-language/dialect film. Except for few scenes (including one of Solina singing Malayan songs), all the characters speak Cantonese. There was no linguistic barrier between the male protagonist (Ching) and the female protagonist (Solina), even though they belonged to different ethnic/lingual groups (the former was Malayan Chinese and latter was indigenous Malayan). The dialogues between the protagonists gave a hint to the audiences that it was also not abnormal that a native Malayan in the 1950s could speak in fluent

[166] Ibid., 145.
[167] Stephen Teo, "Singapore Screen Memories," in *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2006), 153.

Cantonese.[168] In this sense, Cantonese (compared to other Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Teochew) became the language of identity which different ethnic groups in the film shared.

Blood Stains The Valley of Love earned acceptable box office receipts, but Hong Kong critics tended to underestimate the film. One journalist reviewed it as "intricate and complicated, but not so interesting."[169] According to Stephen Teo, with the dramatic plot, this director of the film wanted to achieve a balance between education and entertainment.[170] However, the overdramatic storyline made it of more entertainment value than educational value. Compared to *Blood Stains The Valley of Love*, the second film of the Nanyang Trilogy was more popular among both audiences and critics.

3.3.2 *China Wife*: A Tribute to Traditional Family Value

China Wife, also *Tangshan Wife*, was the second film in the Nanyang Trilogy. Compared with hybrid romance-noir genre style in *Valley*, this film dealt with more traditional family ethnics. The film begins with a dialogue between a poor couple living in rural Macao. Ah-gau (Keung Chung-ping) is preparing to set out for Nanyang to join his cousin (Patrick Tse Yin) in search of employment, leaving his wife Sou Jing (Nam Hung to look after his mother and their baby son. A series of events propelled Ah-gau into high society and he falls in love with a tycoon's daughter, Ming-zyu, (Patsy Kar Ling) and prepared to marry her. Abandoned by Ah-gau, Sou Jing suffers in utter poverty and journeys to Singapore in search of her husband. However, Ah-gau did not

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[168] Before gaining independence in 1957, Malaya was under British rule and English was the official language. Malay, Chinese and Tamil were classified as vernacular languages. These languages served as the medium of instruction in vernacular schools, which were mostly found in rural areas. See Ng Bee Chin and Francesco Cavallaro, "Multilingualism in Southeast Asia: The post-colonial language stories of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore," in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Multilingualism* eds. Montanari, S. and Quay, S. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019).

[169] Li Muzhang 李慕長, "Tanying: Xueran xiangsigu"談影:血染相思谷 [Film Reviews: *Blood Stains The Valley of Love*]. Dagong bao 大公報, May 21, 1957, quoted in Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 144.

[170] Teo, "Singapore Screen Memories," 154.

change his mind and plans to sell his wife and son to rural areas in Malaya. Later Ming-zyu found out the secret and rescued Sou Jing. After a two-year imprisonment, Ah-gau returned to the family and was forgiven by his wife. The couple resume a new life in the end.

The title *China Wife* indicated an image of a representative Chinese wife. This film was a modern adaptation of the Chinese ancient folk tale "Qin Xianglian," which has often been adapted into opera and films. Qin Xianglian was the name of a suffering wife who took care of her mother-in-law and child when her husband, Chen Shimei, went to take part in the national examinations to become an official. Chen later married the princess of the nation and refused to meet his wife and son when they appeared in his house. At last, the princess helped Qin and Chen was executed for deceiving the Emperor. Compared to the original ending of Chen's death, the film *China Wife* was more generous in dealing with familial issues.

The Tangshan-Nanyang Ethnos in *China Wife* was also intriguing. Through parallel editing, the film contrasted the husband's meteoric life in Singapore and the wife's miserable life in backward Tangshan (Macau in this case). However, the female protagonist Sou Jing has a dignified and respectable nature and thus her border crossing journey to look for her husband was, according to Jingjing Chang, "a mission to 'civilize' Nanyang."[171] Under his analysis, both Tangshan and Nanyang had two opposing natures. Tangshan was underdeveloped but with a high integrity, while Nanyang was full of opportunities but also had moral pitfalls. I agree with Chang's analysis but think attention should also be paid to a comparison between the roles of Sou Jing and Ming-zyu. Compared to Ming-zyu, the image of Sou Jing was pitiful and less modern, reiterating the traditional criteria of being a "good wife and loving mother" in Chinese culture. On the other hand, the Malayan fiancée Ming-zyu was fashionable in attire, and also retained a strong moral core. The

[171] Jingjing Chang, *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 139.

two female images became the salespoint of this film. It targeted female audiences in both Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaya. A Singapore newspaper hailed the film as "a must-see film for women."[172] An advertisement in a Hong Kong newspaper called it "A tragic story about a good wife and a loving mother. Dedicated to single and married women."[173]

This film was also full of Cantonese social and culture features. The film's subject of searching for family members in Nanyang was popular in the 1950s. During the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, numerous families fled South China and came to Southeast Asia. The migration experience and the distressing past made Chinese immigrants empathized with films that took up issues of family separation and attempts at family reunion. During the shooting in Singapore, the crew cooperated with the local Cantonese community to shoot on locations such as the Cantonese Association House and ancestry halls. Hence, when viewing the journey of a wife searching for her husband in Singapore, the audience sensed a strong Cantonese ethnic network in Nanyang, like the organization of Tangshan. Another Cantonese feature of Tangshan Wife was its borrowing of Cantonese opera in the plot. Nam Hung, the actress playing the role of the wife, was also a Cantonese opera singer. The director Chen Wen designed scenes in which the wife was singing Cantonese opera to express her mournful life.

3.3.3 *Moon Over Malaya*: Chinese Diasporic Lives in Nanyang

Moon Over Malaya depicted a positive image of a young man who aspired to develop Chinese-language education in Malaya. Coming from Tangshan, Ngok Ming (Patrick Tse Yin) fell in love with and quickly married Cho-lin (Nam Hung), the daughter of a wealthy Chinese businessman. Cho-lin's father agreed to invest in building schools on the condition of Ming's

[172] Nanyang Shangbao 南洋商報, April, 18 to May, 13, 1958, quoted in Grace Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 139.
[173] Huaqiao Ribao 華僑日報, July, 12, 1957, quoted in Grace Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 139.

giving up his education career and joining his business. Ming made the deal with his father-in-law. However, Ming struggled to balance his passion for education and performing his duty of managing the family business. As conflicts between the characters escalate, Cho-lin dies in a car accident. The father-in-law drives Ming out of the family and separates Ming's baby from him. Ming returns to Tangshan, and seven years later, resume his education business. Finally, he repairs the relationship with Cho-lin's father and reunites with his daughter.

This film was about the dilemma young male emigrants faced between ideals and the practical necessities of making a living. As a young migrant whose cannot pursue his interest in education, Ngok Ming has to enter the business world under his father-in-law's pressure. This subject was inspiring and practical, and examples were ubiquitous in the postwar era. Instead of working in the mining and rubber industries, the young generation of Tangshan came Nanyang hoping to engage in new, middle-class occupations. Chinese-language education was one major opportunity. However, the male protagonist's ambition to become an educator is hampered by his family obligations. As a result, Ngok Ming's preoccupation with education, his failure as a businessman, and the final conflict between wife and husband lead to the wife's death from a car accident. The father-in-law blamed Ngok Ming and forbid him from ever seeing his own daughter. After seven years, Ngok Ming returned Malaya from Hong Kong. The conflicts between Ngok Ming and his father-in-law finally reconciled and Ngok Ming and his daughter reunited after years of separation.

This hardship Ngok Ming confronted coincided with the fate of Chinese-language education itself in Southeast Asia in the second half of the 1950s. From 1954 to 1959, Chinese-language education was suppressed in Singapore. This related to the postwar era cultural and education

policies of the Singapore-Malaya colonial government towards the local Chinese communities.[174] During that time, the government did not attempt to regulate and support the number of Chinese-language schools but, at the same time, encouraged the growth of English-stream schools. The limitation towards Chinese-language education reflected the colony's cautious attitude towards communist China. The colony, an ally of both the British and American governments, was alert to the infiltration of Leftism after 1949. Like other industries such as film and publishing, education was at the frontline of anti-communist propaganda. Consequently, Chinese-language education could be easily labeled as in league with leftist and communist ideology.

As Mak noted, "Chinese-language education… was a sensitive subject in Singapore and Malaya in 1950s and 1960s. Although this film touched upon the complex topic, it did not involve with political issues, which was a taboo in the Nanyang market."[175] The obsession with an education career and the conflicts with his businessman father-in-law suggested an image of the male protagonist as a "radical Leftist."[176] Therefore, the director Chun Kim, who also directed Valley, intentionally avoided the sensitive political issue. Instead, he emphasized the conflicts of love and ideals in promoting this film. An advertisement in the Hong Kong newspapers called it "The love between father and daughter, between husband and wife, between sisters, all the most affectionate and moving."[177]

Another feature of *Moon Over Malaya* was an eight-minute tourist-perspective scenery. With her voiceover, the female character Cho-lin guided the newcomer Ming to visit the various landmarks and cities in Malaya, such as The Royal Museum, Fortress of Malacca, Penang, Mosque

[174] Kwok Kian-Woon, "Chinese-Educated Intellectuals in Singapore: Marginality, Memory and Modernity," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29, no. 3 (2001): 495-519.
[175] Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 149.
[176] Mak, *Xianggangdianying yu Xinjiapo*, 156.
[177] Ibid., 152.

in Kuala Lumpur, Zoo Johor, Tong Wah Cave and Taiping Lake. Kong Ngee publicized the natural sceneries and modern images of Singapore and Malay, providing a new and hybrid "Nanyang imagination" for its audience in Hong Kong.

Inspired by Kong Ngee's Nanyang Trilogy, in the 1950s, a series of films were shot or set in Nanyang, featuring a wide range of stories about the kinship and romance between people from China (mainly Hong Kong and Macau) and Nanyang.[178] Mostly produced in Hong Kong and made in Cantonese-language/dialect, these films depicted the diasporic Chinese lives in and between China and Southeast Asia.

3.3.4 Diasporic Identities: Family, Nation, Culture

From this analysis of the Nanyang Trilogy, we have a deeper insight into the Tangshan-Nanyang Ethnos in terms of distanced-imagination, borderless journey, shared languages and familiar domestic conflicts. Although "Tangshan (Hong Kong and Macau)" and "Nanyang (Singapore and Malaya)" contrasted with each other in many occasions such as the geographical scenes and in the types of characters, the audience still could sense the harmonious relationship between them. This was because of the geo-political commonalities shared by the two colonies. Both under British rule in the 1950s, the Chinese population shared such cultural experiences as southern cultures rooted in southern China, and a shared colonial memory. For Hong Kong audiences, Nanyang cities were exhibited "in a sensual foreign style" and showcased "arresting lifestyles of tranquility, vibrancy and urbanism."[179] After over a century's efforts, many Chinese

[178] Grandview 大觀: *Malaya Love Affair* (*Malaiya Zhilian* 马来亚之恋, 1954); Cathay 國泰: *Romance in Singapore* (*Xingzhou Yanji* 星洲艷跡, 1956), *The Old Man from Southeast Asia* (*Nanyang Yabo* 南洋亞伯, 1958); Shaw Brothers 邵氏: *The Merdeka Bridge* (*Duliqiao Zhilian* 獨立橋之戀, 1959), *When Durians Bloom* (*Liulian Piaoxiang* 榴蓮飄香, 1959), *Bride from Another Town* (*Guobu Xinniang* 過埠新娘, 1959). Besides these large studios, other companies also followed this trend, such as Wing Wah 榮華 film company produced the Amoy language film *Love of Malaya* (*Malaiya Zhilian* 馬來亞之戀, 1959).

[179] Klavier J. Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Culture: Worlding Film, Television, and Pop Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 201.

migrants in Nanyang has transformed their community into middle-class lives with respectable social and economic status. Meanwhile, the migration from Tangshan to Nanyang was continual. The images of both old and new generations of migrants were represented in the Nanyang Trilogy (such as businessman, educator, grassroot worker, school kids).

In addition, Chinese people in Hong Kong, Macao, Malaya and Singapore shared an ambivalence about their identity and a shared desire to find some identity.[180] In the 1950s, Chinese in Southeast Asia were unified by Chinese-language education, kinship and business ties. According to Klavier J. Wang, they founded a particular overseas "Chinese identity," which was politically differentiated from either the Communists or the Nationalists, while they integrated with the local hybridized society in language use and living styles.[181]

Scholars are divided in deciding whether Kong Ngee's work belongs to either the leftist or the rightist camp in Hong Kong cinema. Since the other two major film companies -- The Shaw Brothers and Cathay -- belonged to the rightist camp because of their deep contact with KMT financing and marketing, Kong Ngee is also considered as a "rightist" company because of its deep connection with the British colonies of Singapore and Malaya. Others think Kong Ngee had similar aesthetics and self-imposed educational obligation, which were similar to left-wing companies such as Changcheng 長城 (Great Wall) and Fenghuang 鳳凰 (Phoenix). Also, some of Kong Ngee's most important filmmakers, such as the chief manager Chun Kim, started their career at the left-wing company Zhonglian 中聯 (China United).

I regard Kong Ngee as a more market-conscious company and with a less political burden. Its choice of making Cantonese film to cater to audiences in Singapore and Malaya was a smart

[180] Teo, "Singapore Screen Memories," 144.
[181] Wang, *Hong Kong Popular Culture*, 201-202.

move to avoid direct involvement with Left-Right conflicts in filmmaking. The production of Nanyang Trilogy reflected a transnational mode of Chinese film production and distribution during Cold War. With its production based in Hong Kong and its capital base in Singapore, Kong Ngee and The Nanyang Trilogy signified a transnational Chinese cinema characterized by spatial, cultural, linguistic and ethnic associations between Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaya.

Conclusion

1950's Hong Kong was marked by political volatility and economic uncertainty accompanied by the escalating Cold War in Asia. During this period, the local film industry faced both chances and challenges: an influx of migrants from mainland China, the loss of the mainland China market after the establishment of the People's Republic, an ideological battle between the "Left" and the "Right," and a rivalry between Cantonese and Mandarin film productions. All the factors collectively drove the local film industry to search for bigger markets outside. Compared to Taiwan and North America and other regions, the value of the South-East Asian market was prominent in terms of its geographical proximity, similar political situations and shared cultural heritage.

As a pioneer of the southbound market searching, the Hong Kong-based Singapore-financed film company, Kong Ngee, witness the growing intimacy between Hong Kong cinema and the Southeast Asia market. It took part in the emergence of both Cantonese cinema and transnational diasporic cinema in an inter-Asian context in the 1950s. Cantonese cinema, with its production base in Hong Kong and capital base in Singapore, transformed from low-budget, small scale cinema to a regional and indeed transnational cinema.

The Nanyang Trilogy was Kong Ngee's most representative films. The exotic location and contemporary urban setting in Southeast Asia ensured the phenomenal success of the trilogy.

What's more, The Nanyang Trilogy of Kong Ngee was a microcosm of this regional and transnational cinema and recorded what Stephen Teo calls "screen memories" that reflect diasporic Chinese journeys and migrant's lives within certain spatial and temporal contexts.[182]

Although both Kong Ngee and Cantonese cinema slumped in the late 1960s because of industrial, social and political changes in both regions, Kong Ngee's business infrastructure, market structure, and production strategies set a model for successive transnational companies. Together with the Shaw Brothers and Cathy, it paved the way for the development of Hong Kong cinema into one of the most dynamic capitals of global filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s.

[182] Teo, "Singapore Screen Memories," 144.

Conclusion

The foregoing three chapters have examined the early history of Chinese cinema in a transnational perspective from the 1930s to the 1950s as a shifting process in tandem with social and political contexts. This dissertation has argued that Chinese cinema, from the very beginning, was the product of transnational movements of capital, people and ideas among the Chinese diaspora. The common experiences among those in the diaspora and the global links among various Chinese communities initiated and sustained the development of Chinese cinema. Cross-border filmmaking and individual filmmakers (both Chinese and overseas Chinese), traditional culture (such as Chinese operas and diverse language/dialects systems), and a massive diasporic audience (such as Chinese in North American and Southeast Asia) altogether defined and sustained Chinese filmmaking as a cultural production. At the same time, a variety of complex social-political events, such as the Sino-Japanese War, the establishment of the PRC and the Cold War, provided both chances and challenges for transnational Chinese filmmaking.

Chronologically, the dissertation focused on three historical moments of Chinese cinema: the advent of sound films in the early 1930s (Chapter One); the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1930s and 1940s (Chapter Two) and the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950s (Chapter Three), to pursue a trajectory of how the larger historical context shaped the development of diasporic Chinese cinema. Spatially, this dissertation has outlined the shifting multilateral relations between film industries in Shanghai, Hong Kong, San Francisco and Singapore in terms of technology, capital, talent, market and ideas. I especially paid attention to filmmaking activities that occurred across borders, examining filmmakers who participated in a wider, global sphere that sometimes transcended ethnic, gender, linguistic and cultural boundaries.

By looking into a range of pioneering filmmakers, including the opera masters Mei Lanfang and Xue Juexian, Chinese film distributers like Kwan Man-ching, and Chinese American director Joseph Sunn Jue, Chapter One outlined a landscape of the earliest Chinese sound filmmaking in different localities in and out of China. It stressed that the technology of sound facilitated the collaboration between Chinese opera culture and Chinese filmmaking in a transnational context. In addition, it showed the influences of traditional opera on the repertoire, performers, global audiences and artist aesthetics of early sound filmmaking. Therefore, I argued that transnational Chinese opera culture provided a large and diverse mass audience for new modes of transnational Chinese filmmaking. The intimacy between film and opera in the earliest sound films represented an alternative Chinese cinema based upon transnational Chinese diasporas. Opera was therefore central to the development of a transnational Chinese cinema.

Chapter two discussed the wartime transnational cinematic liaison between Chinese filmmakers in San Francisco and Hong Kong. When the Second Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937, filmmaking talents as well as capital flooded into Hong Kong from mainland China and overseas Chinese communities, sustaining and stimulating the prosperity of the local film industry. Esther Eng, a San Francisco-born young Chinese woman, was among them. Developing her filmmaking interests in the Chinatown opera houses, she produced *Heartache* by a mix of Chinese and western talents. When she came to Hong Kong to distribute this Chinese American made film, Eng skillfully manipulated her overseas experiences to promote the film. In addition, her acquaintance with opera troupes and wartime patriotism among diasporic Chinese facilitated her filmmaking in Hong Kong, which included new themes such as patriotism, familial melodrama and modern working women. Eng represented a vigorous interaction between diasporic Chinese in and out of China during the wartime. From 1937 to 1941, Hong Kong had become the regional

center of Cantonese film culture and a key nodal point in a transnational pan-Chinese cultural network that also included Shanghai, Canton, San Francisco, Honolulu and Singapore. Through Eng's experiences, we had a clearer insight into Chinese film production, film products and markets based on ethnic Chinese culture and the shifting and complex identities of the transnational filmmakers in a volatile wartime environment.

Chapter Three focused on a single film company – Kong Ngee – which epitomized the development of postwar cinematic connections along a Cantonese, Hong Kong-Southeast Asia axis. When the Shanghai film industry was isolated from the rest of the world after 1949, the cinemas of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia became much closer. To sustain its theater circuits in Southeast Asia, Kong Ngee shifted its base from Singapore to Hong Kong and embarked on making Cantonese films. A vast population of Cantonese-speaking Chinese in the region of Singapore and Malaya guaranteed a market for this transnational company. Also, to avoid ideological strife and to compete with the big-budget Mandarin films in Hong Kong, Kong Ngee dispatched a filmmaking crew from Hong Kong to Singapore-Malaya to make three Cantonese films. This so-called *Nanyang Trilogy* was characterized by not only cross-border shooting, but also with the lives and the hybrid culture of overseas Chinese after the Second World War.

Despite differences in time and place, none of the examples of transnational filmmaking I mentioned above occurred within a single nation-state boundary. The film crew was often with multi-racial and multi-cultural. What's more, the targeted audiences, and the filmgoers were often transnational. These factors altogether reminds us that these important stories do not easily fit within the narrative of the nation-state. This dissertation rediscovered and resituated marginalized diasporic filmmakers and filmmaking in a transnational diasporic paradigm. It broadened the scope of Chinese cinema beyond the regulated geographic, ideological and conceptual bounds.

As a result of these findings, I argue that while some might contend that ethnic Chinese filmmakers and film audiences in Hong Kong, San Francisco and Southeast Asia were not literally "Chinese," however, the films they made still should be considered as "Chinese films." Therefore, to better understand Chinese cinema, future studies should expand their vision and address cross-border cinematic interactions between Chinese filmmakers and their peers in other countries. The long-standing history of the diasporic Chinese film audiences I have outlined in this dissertation also remind us that we need to give more consideration to a film's marketing and consumption, instead of only stressing the location of its production.

There are several limitations of this dissertation. Firstly, it lacks sufficient firsthand sources such as newspaper and magazine accounts, and videos of the films. Because most of this study concerns events that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, many sources were not available. Particularly frustrating is the absence of any copy of key films that have apparently been lost. Limitations in my access to libraries and online databases increased the difficulty of providing direct clues to prove my analysis and arguments. Secondly, my engagement with previous studies was not as strong as I would have liked. Although transnational Chinese cinema is an all-compassing concept and many scholars have studied the topic from many angles, there are few studies on the subject of early diasporic Chinese filmmaking. It was hard to collect secondary sources scattered in publications with different focuses, which made the analysis more difficult. Thirdly, it is possible that a heavy emphasis on the transnational identity of the film figures might trivialize other important identities that influenced their filmmaking career. For example, although I valued and addressed Esther Eng's role as a pioneer ethnic Chinese director, I did not pay enough attention to the ways her gender identity also profoundly shaped her directorial career. Her style of dress and social behavior was radically different from her female compatriots in Hong Kong at

that time, arousing interest among Hong Kong critics and audiences not only in her films but herself as a film icon. In future research, I will work harder to collect and present evidence and push forward my analyses.

All in all, the disputes and debates surrounding the term "Chinese cinema" call for an approach less "national-centric" and "mainland China-centric." Transnational Chinese cinema developed very early on in the development of the motion picture industry. This dissertation shows this phenomenon and the social-historical context that underlined it. As Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh has written, "Chinese film history is overdetermined with expected, surprising findings and discoveries, like turning and adjusting views from inside of a kaleidoscope."[183] From early opera-film interactions, to the mobility of a Chinese American director during wartime, to the postwar regional connections between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, transnational diasporic Chinese cinema, by its nature, forces us to think what we really mean when talking about "Chinese cinema."

[183] Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, ed. *Kaleidoscopic Histories: Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2018), 13.

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