

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

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The 1930s witnessed a pivotal decade in the Chinese film industry's transition from silent picture to sound film production.¹ In 1931, using four songs from Chinese opera, dubbed by the opera master Mei Lanfang, Shanghai's Mingxing Film Studio produced China's earliest sound film *The Songstress Red Peony* (Genü Hong mudan 歌女紅牡丹, 1931).² Following in its wake, in 1933, Shanghai's Tianyi Film Company produced the first Cantonese-dialect talkie *White Golden Dragon* (Bai Jinlong 白金龍, 1933), an adaptation from a namesake Cantonese opera. Soon it became a hit in Hong Kong-Guangdong region and other Cantonese-speaking communities in Southeast Asia and North America.³ In the same year, in San Francisco, another Cantonese talkie *Romance of Songsters* (Gelü qingchao 歌侶情潮, 1933), concerning the lives in a trans-Pacific Cantonese opera troupe, was produced by Grandview Film Company, funded by local Chinese community.

What lies behind the earliest Chinese sound filmmaking attempts was the cross-regional/border feature of the cinematic activities which epitomized different local dialects and popular cultures. It seems a coincidence that first Chinese-language sound films, either made in Shanghai, Hong Kong or in San Francisco, were all based on Chinese opera.⁴ These examples suggest that when filmmakers at home and abroad began to experiment with sound, they were conscious of integrating various kinds of opera music and singings into the films. Why did Chinese films have an initial connection with opera? When talkie hit the scene, how did the Chinese-language talkies manifest regional, cultural and linguistic differences? How to observe the early history of Chinese-language filmmaking crossing national border? This essay revisits the earliest scenes of Chinese sound film productions by focusing on the opera-film relation and analyzing the interaction between opera culture and motion picture not only within the national boundary but in a transnational viewpoint in the 1930s.

Despite overseas Chinese's pioneering engagement in the early making of Chinese talkies, most scholarship rarely discussed it for various reasons.⁵ The most important reason lies in the solidified interpretation of "Chinese cinema" in film historiography, which mostly describe the filmmaking associated with the nation-state of "China".⁶ Therefore, transnational filmmaking and filmmakers became invisible under the hegemonic national paradigm. This essay challenges the national paradigm and attempts to reveal an alternative Chinese cinema rooted in Chinese diaspora culture which was characterized by a complex of issues of nations, communities, languages, traditions and modernity.

Although this paper mainly focuses on three earliest Chinese-language sound films, its narrative weaves together materials across various national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Thus, the complexity of the historical and social context necessitates the transnational approach of the study. In this paper, the transnational approach could extricate Chinese filmmaking and opera culture from the constraints of national borders and provides a nuance and a broader notion of "Chineseness" in worldwide. In this way, we could evaluate the impact the diasporic filmmaking and opera culture might have on the mainstream or popular cinema within either a national or transnational context.

"There is Something in Common": When Opera Meets Film

Since its fledgling stage, cinema has engaged with theater in many aspects such as genres, aesthetics and personnel. Nineteenth-century theatrical genres such as melodrama and vaudeville impacted many popular film genres in its primitive era. In 1904, Georges Méliès produced *La Damnation du Docteur Faust*, a thirteen-minute silent film based on Gounod's opera. In 1909, Thomas Edison launched his series of "Grand Operas", which were a series of adaptations from classic opera sections into motion pictures. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Warner Bros. produced abundant opera shorts using the Vitaphone technique, signifying the arrival of the sound technology in film industry.⁷ Directors, writers, actors, and personnel also worked across these two media. D. W. Griffith was a stage actor and playwright before he became a movie director, and Sergei Eisenstein directed plays and designed scenery on the stage before he started making films. During Hollywood's golden years (from the late 1920s to the early 1960s), the basic music of a film was from opera. Alfred Hitchcock's

films was the best example. For example, the film *Rear Window* (1954) opens with Johann Strauss Senior's "Radetzky March" being played in the streets, signifying that the elder Waltz King rules.⁸ As Hitchcock once noted, "It may sound far-fetched to compare a dramatic talkie with opera, but there is something in common: the techniques of opera allow music that 'echoes' dialogue and 'subtly comment[s]' upon action."⁹ All the examples demonstrated the internal connections between stage and screen. "In all its complexity and ambivalence, the historical interplay of opera and film is a fascinating topic unto itself."¹⁰

Traditional theatrical attraction to cinema during the early stage of the motion picture was not limited to western cultures. In Japan, traditional theatrical genres, such as Kabuki, Noh, and Bunraku, also strongly imposed their artistic conventions on early Japanese cinema during the first decade of the twentieth century.¹¹ According to Chinese film historian Cheng Jihua, the first film made by the Chinese is *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjunshan 定軍山, 1905), produced in Beijing¹²; Hong Kong film historian Yu Muyun identifies *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (Zhuang Zi shiqi 莊子試妻, 1913) as the first film made in Hong Kong.¹³ *Dingjun Mountain* is a documentary staging of an episode of a famous Peking opera; *Zhuang Tests His Wife* is an adaptation from a popular Cantonese opera with the same title. These records show that Chinese opera (including both Peking and Cantonese opera) was the original source for the earliest days of filmmaking in China in different regions. In the traditional Chinese context, the common form of stage opera is called *xiqu*, referring both to drama and song. As an audience, the action of going to enjoy an opera performance is *ting xi*, "to listen to an opera." Music and singing are central to the opera performance. Therefore, Chinese opera films in the silent era are deprived of most of their stage charm. When major theaters in Shanghai imported new projectors from the United States to prepare for the coming of sound in 1929, opera again became the themes and elements of the first sound films in China.

"Never Heard Mr. Mei Singing in a Movie": China's Earliest Talkie

In 1931, China's largest film studio, the Mingxing Film Company (Star, founded in 1922), produced the first sound film in China — *The Songstress Red*

Peony (*Genü hong mudan*, 1931). The dialogue and four opera songs of this film was recorded onto cylinder wax in Shanghai's Pathé studio, which produced most records in China at the time. Besides being the first talkie, *The Songstress Red Peony* is notable for another reason: it features China's opera master, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), known for his playing of China's most memorable female characters on stage. As a close associate of people in the film industry, Mei agreed to sing in *The Songstress Red Peony*, by dubbing over the vocals of the lead actress, Hu Die.

In fact, Mei's engagement with sound picture was earlier than his dubbing in *The Songstress Red Peony*. Almost one year ago, in early 1930, Mei Lanfang had already appeared in a sound film documentary made by Paramount Pictures during his sensational Peking opera tour in America. In 1930, accompanied by about twenty Peking opera performers, musicians, artistic consultants, Mei Lanfang, a top Peking opera actor, toured the United States for about six months with carefully prepared performances. In Seattle, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego, and Honolulu, the audience came to see the top Chinese woman impersonator of his day.¹⁴

In the Paramount's opera short, a female announcer of Chinese descent greeted American audiences settling into their seats for the highly anticipated Peking Opera performances of Mei Lanfang, "Mr. Mei Lanfang takes the part of women characters, but he is not a female impersonator, according to the western sense of the word. He does not imitate the real woman in nature, but through lines and movements, he tried to create an ideal woman."¹⁵ Mei then appeared on the stage, performing an episode of a traditional Chinese opera "Killing the Tiger General" (Fei Zhen'e Cihu). Wearing exquisite costume, Mei is playing an ancient young woman who was gently conversing with a military officer. "General, you are the peerless hero, the pillars of the nation. [將軍乃蓋世英雄，王朝良棟。]" "Princess, I am just an ordinary man. You are flattering me. [豈敢，過虎不才。怎當公主稱美。]" "How about having a drink with me? [只是還要請將軍陪奴壹杯。]" "Oh, drink with you? [哦 要我陪壹杯?]" "Yes. [正是。]" "Of course. Let the maidservants pour the liquor. [使得使得，侍女們斟酒。]"¹⁶

When Mei was continuing his six-month tour in America, this short documentary had already imported and screened in the Zhenguang Theater (True Light) in Beijing. An audience was exclaiming, "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!”¹⁷

Many scholars associate Mei Lanfang’s crossover from stage to screen, and his American tour in 1930 with the nationalism approach. The 1930s witnessed the imminence and the anticipation of war and a yearning for nationalist empowerment characterized by the social atmosphere in China. In the film industry, professionals are embarking on the construction of a national cinema. To critics and scholars, Mei Lanfang is a pure nationalist and a culture ambassador because of his innovational cooperation with filmmaking and transnational performances. As Laikwan Pang pointed out, “professional concerns were also inevitably caught up with ... the use of music and dialects translated into terms of homogeneity and diversity in the making of a national culture.”¹⁸ Stephen Teo also noted, the opera-film encounter was “at the vanguard of historical experiments serving as a test model for the very development of cinema in China,” therefore, it became “a quintessential embodiment of a cultural-nationalist form in Chinese cinema.”¹⁹ Yueh-yu Yeh has described the process of “sinification” by which cinematic genres are granted Chinese characteristics so that cinema, being foreign to China, can develop in a Chinese environment.²⁰ The problem lies behind the “cultural-nationalist” approach is that it observes the internalization of the Chinese sound picture as a monolithic national building cinematic effort and ignores its vibrant negotiations and interactions across the boundaries like the nation, language and culture.

Mei’s crossover to the silver screen and starring in opera shorts and documentaries was a collaborative attempt carried out by both Chinese and foreign cinematic powers. Performing on the international stages such America, Japan and the Soviet Union in his early time, Mei had already bypassed the national and cultural boundaries. Mei’s intimacy with cinema provided an example of the bidirectional interactions between the Chinese opera and cinema. However, Mei is not the sole example to explain Chinese opera-film liaison. To observe a more unabridged picture of the times of emergence of Chinese talkies, it is inevitable to shift the vision to a broader scale which bypassing linguistic and national boundary.

Cantonese vs. Mandarin: Xue Juexian and the First Cantonese Talkie

Chinese opera encompasses a variety of genres in relation to many regions and dialects. In China, the two major opera genres have coexisted for a long time. In the late Ming Dynasty (around the year of 1600) Cantonese opera arose as the most prominent regional style performed in the Guangdong and Guangxi areas. While Peking opera originated in Anhui Province and came to Beijing in the mid-Qing dynasty (in the year of 1790) and became fully developed and recognized by the mid-19th century. Peking opera dominated the northern part of China, such as Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai while Cantonese opera is popular in the South such as Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macau and among Chinese communities overseas such as Southeast Asia and the North America. Among the different styles and variations in language, in the 1920s, with the overwhelming popularity of legendary Mei Lanfang and a series of new theatrical innovations, Peking opera is touted as the most sophisticated model, while in terms of its popularity and melodious music Cantonese opera runs a close second.

The competition between Peking opera and Cantonese opera prolonged the era of the motion picture. "Cantonese filmmaking was always torn between political alignment with the nation and its pursuits of commercial interest and entertainment value."²¹ To maintain "the linguistic and political unification of the nation", the Nationalist government implemented strict screen policies towards Cantonese films. However, stirred by the success of Mingxing Film Company's *The Songstress Red Peony*, filmmakers were confident to get rid of the restrictions and prepared to make dialect films of their mother-tongue. They also got inspiration from the theaters.

In 1933, Runje Shaw (1896-1975) of Shanghai's Tianyi Film Company cooperated with a prestigious Cantonese opera star named Xue Juexian (Sit Gok-sin, 1904-1956) from Guangdong Province to produce the first Cantonese sound film in Shanghai, *White Golden Dragon* (*Baijinlong*, 1933). This film was an adaptation of the Xue's popular Cantonese opera of the same name. In 1930, adapted from a Hollywood silent film *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter*, the Cantonese opera "White Golden Dragon" debuted in Shanghai. By 1930, Shanghai had become a cultural and commercial hub for migrants from various

regions in China with a sizable Cantonese-speaking community. Therefore, this western-style Cantonese opera won the favor of the Cantonese audiences in Shanghai. The success of the opera gave Xue confidence. He also perceived the massive movie market in Cantonese-speaking area was promising. Therefore, with the financial support of a Shanghai-based film company, Xue was determined to make Cantonese talkie in Shanghai. In 1933, Xue produced the first Cantonese talkie, which became a huge hit in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia.²²

During the production, Xue absorbed elements “from facial cosmetics application to the introduction of violin and saxophone as regular instruments, from the more agile northern martial arts (of Peking [Beijing] opera) to the aesthetic of the silver screen.”²³ His pioneering creation of various elements from Beijing opera, modern drama, and Hollywood cinema reflected his artistic interests in different art forms and cultural media.²⁴ Brought up and educated in Hong Kong, learning and earned fame in Guangzhou, making the earliest Cantonese talkie in Shanghai, Xue Juexian’s versatile life and career was influenced by multi-cultures and social environments. Compared with Mei Lanfang’s the documentary-like opera shorts made by others, Xue’s *White Golden Dragon* and his later Cantonese films took the initiative of making enterprising experimentation with new media technologies and genres.

With the arrival of sound in Chinese films, language or dialect became a critical factor to cater to film audiences. Xue Juexian’s success in making the first Cantonese talkie predicted a promising future for the Hong Kong-Guangdong region as the largest production center of Cantonese talkies, exporting its product not only to Cantonese-speaking communities in South China, but also to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America. In its rivalry with Shanghai-based Mandarin films for market share and cultural supremacy, Cantonese cinema was inevitably engaged in a wider spectrum in cultural politics on local, national, and transnational levels. Xue Juexian’s trans-regional and transnational filmic endeavor inspired other sound film pioneers on the other side of Pacific Ocean.

“Let’s Making Cantonese Talkie in San Francisco”: Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue’s Encounter in America

In the same year of 1933 when Xue Juexian made *White Golden Dragon*, *Romance of Opera Singers* was made in San Francisco with Kwan Man-ching as the producer and Joseph Sunn Jue the director. 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 the experience of 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 film productions in the United States. His plan was to hunt for business opportunity and to raise money for his company which then had financial problems.²⁵ In his luggage, there were two feature films and a documentary of Lianhua: *Reminiscence of Peking* (1930), *Three Modern Women* (1933), *Shanghai Battle* (1931). The last is the documentary features Chinese resistance against Japanese army 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 is dominant in the domestic market and the political environment was unstable. Also, the emergence of sound films at the early 1930s provided a good chance to distribute films in Chinese communities abroad for a shared language and cultural roots.

In his autobiography, he recorded the cities he went to America and Canada: San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, Washington D.C, New York, Boston, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and so on. The reception was successful.²⁶ Among the screened films, the documentary aroused most sense of nationalist feeling among immigrants for recording the ongoing wars in China. People told Kwan two years ago when the battle was reported in local newspaper, they immediately sent money back to support the resistance against the Japanese army. When they heard the victory of a battle via newspaper, they set off firecrackers, a traditional way of celebrating events and festivals in China. Why were they concerned so much about the political situation of China? Chinese overseas had a long history of distanced-nationalism since the late Qing Dynasty. For the

early migrations in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, traditional concept of “Luoye guigen” was 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 identity of the overseas Chinese.”²⁷ Therefore, the political situation in China directly influenced immigrants’ sojourned life and retired life.

As an elite with social connections in both China and America, Moon Kwan’s transnational identity and social status enabled him to have a more loosen feeling towards “distance” between Chinatown and motherland. In his mind, Chinese long-distance national feeling and their actual sojourned life reconciled with each other through the fresh visual experience. Witnessed the enthusiasm of the local people towards Chinese films, Kwan further believed the propitious future of releasing Chinese films in North America. Kwan and Jue then set up the Grandview Film Company to produce *Romance of the Songsters*.

Setting in San Francisco, the film told a love triangle in a traditional Cantonese opera troupe. The storyline was inspired by the new romantic literature which was popular among youngster in China while some scenes reflecting opera actors and actresses’ stage performance was particularly designed by Moon Kwan to cater the audience who were the fans of Cantonese opera. After watching the sample, Kwan was satisfied with the sound and light effects and actor’s performance and promised him the related publication in Hong Kong. Meanwhile he urged Jue to raise money to buy recording machine so that they could make Cantonese talkie in Hong Kong²⁸. Also, he suggested Grandview to become the proxy of Lianhua to distribute the second-round screening of Kwan’s films, preparing itself for bigger projects and cooperation between the two companies.

Kwan accomplished his mission for successful distribution of Lianhua films. Moreover, he bridged the contact between San Francisco-based Grandview and Hong Kong/Shanghai-based Lianhua before his tour in America. From then on, he and Jue and other transnational film pioneers strived for deeper cooperation between San Francisco and Hong Kong filmmakers for a long period.

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

theme and San Francisco's familiar landscape made the audience feel a sense of dual intimacy. More importantly, unlike the Lianhua films brought by Moon Kwan made in Shanghai with the northern accent of Mandarin Chinese, *Romance of the Songsters* was as Moon Kwan called it "the first Cantonese sound feature". The familiar accent of a native place on screen further stimulated people's nostalgia feeling and their contemporary home - Chinatown. It shortened the distance from the home country. The disparate two places seemed harmoniously blended on screen. Until the 1930s, most Chinese immigrants were laborers and small businessmen. Living in a different country, hometown is distant for all the Chinese immigrants who esteemed themselves as sojourners and outsiders, especially when Chinese Exclusion Act still took effect and anti-Chinese attitudes was prevailing in the host society.

When *Romance* was released, Kwan had already shipped back 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. To Hong Kong audience, it is a Cantonese film with an exotic foreign setting. They enjoyed the familiar storyline but were more attracted to the purposely left landscape of Gold Mountain and Chinatown. This is for the first time an American-made Chinese film was exhibited and made a hit in China, showing a promising future for filmmakers across the ocean (both Chinese and American-born Chinese) to produce transnational and multicultural film products in the following years.

Conclusion:

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. During the pioneering period of filmmaking, opera practitioners like Mei Lanfang and filmmakers like Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue, functioned as cultural threads connecting diasporic Chinese communities in and out of China by "reinvent[ing] filmic language and acting styles to blend the visual and the aural."²⁹ 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.

When examining the opera-film encounter in Chinese context, it is more accurate to observe their dynamic interactions within the larger space of Chinese-language cinemas and the transnational connections between Hong Kong, Guangdong and South China, Shanghai, Southeast Asia, and Hollywood. By examining the production and distribution of the three earliest Chinese talkies *The Songstress Red Peony*, *White Golden 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 the Chinese diaspora film history in its initial stage and rewrite a chapter in the hybrid history of transnational Chinese visual and stage culture invisible under the national paradigm of Chinese film historiography. Early Chinese-language sound filmmaking evolved 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).

Finally, by adopting transnationalism as the research methodology, this paper reveals the lively Chinese opera-film interacting scenery across the ocean during the 1920s and the 1930s. In this way, our understanding and observation towards Chinese opera and film could be more flexible and diverse, jumping through the stereotypical distinctions between “center” and “periphery” and between “inside” and “outside” in both Chinese and American national context.

Notes

- 1 Silent film production continued throughout the transitional period in the 1930s. This decade witnessed the releases of some of the most highly regarded works of Chinese silent cinema. As Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin point out, somewhat paradoxically, it was only after the advent of sound that silent cinema reached its heyday as an art form in China. Li Suyuan, Hu Jubin 鄺蘇元, 胡菊彬 *Zhongguo wusheng dianying shi* 中國無聲電影史 [The History of Chinese Silent Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianing chubanshe, 1996), 1.
- 2 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.
- 3 In 1925, Runje Shaw and his brothers founded the 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 make Cantonese films.
- 4 Yeh Yueh-yu, "Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 41.3 (2002), 78.
- 5 There is a proliferation of studies on Chinese diasporic cinema from the 1970s that focus on film genres specific to China (such as Chinese martial art films) or well-known contemporary filmmakers with Chinese origins (such as Ang Lee 李安 and Wayne Wang 王穎 in the United States). There are only a few studies that examine early diasporic Chinese filmmakers and the social, historical, and cultural conditions in which they and their films emerged and developed. See Han Yanli 韓燕麗, *Nashonaru shinema no achiaranete: Chūgokukei iminn no eiga to nashonaru aidenniti* 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 National Cinema: Overseas Chinese Cinema and National Identity] (Kyoto: Koyo Shobo, 2014).
- 6 For discussions on the concepts of "national cinema" and "transnational cinema", see Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, "Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies," *Transnational Cinemas* 1.1(2010), 7-21.
- 7 Vitaphone was a sound film process used on features and during the brief period from 1926 to 1932, it was used for nearly 2,000 titles predominantly produced by Warner Bros. It was the most successful of the sound-on-disc processes before the emergence of the sound-on-film. The earlier sound technology did not allow the soundtrack to be printed on the actual film; instead, it was issued on a separate 12 to 16-inch phonograph record. The discs were separately played while the film was being projected. Many early talkies, including *The Jazz Singer* (1927), used the Vitaphone technique.
- 8 Jack Sullivan, "Hitchcock and Music," in *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, eds. Thomas Leitch and Leland Poague (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 221.
- 9 Alfred Hitchcock, "On Music in Films." Interview by Stephen Watts. 1933-34. *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*. ed. Sidney Gottlieb. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 241-245. For more discussions on the relation of opera music and early films, see David Schroeder, *Cinema's Illusions, Opera's Allure: The Operatic Impulse in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2002).
- 10 Quoted from the website of a research project called "The Profanation of Opera: Music

- and Drama on Film”, conducted by João Pedro Cachopo on a Marie-Sklódowska-Curie Fellowship. <https://www.propera2020.com/about.html> (accessed 15 Sep. 2019).
- 11 Ibid., 10. According to Jeongwon Joe, the very first cinematic attempt in Japan was the filming of two Kabuki shosagoto (dance) plays. See more in Keiko McDonald, *Japanese Classical Theater in Film* (London and Toronto: Associate University Presses, 1994), 23.
 - 12 Cheng Jihua 程季華, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* 中國電影發展史 [The History of the Development of Chinese Film] vol. 1 (Beijing: China Film Press, 1981), 13–14.
 - 13 Yu Muyun 余慕雲, “Xianggang dianying fazhan shihua 香港電影史話” [Notes on the Development of Hong Kong Cinema], in *Xianggang dianying bashi nian* 香港電影八十年 [Eighty Years of Hong Kong Cinema] (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1994), 12.
 - 14 Barbara E. Scott, “We Bow to Mei Lan-fang: The American Triumph of China’s Matinée Idol”, *The North American Review*, vol. 229, No. 5(May 1930), pp.572-575. Tan (or *dan* “旦”) refers to the female lead roles in Chinese opera. Mei’s exclusiveness in play the roles of “dan” won him another title as “Queen of Peking Opera” in China.
 - 15 The announcer, Soo Yong (1903-1984), is an interpreter for Mei’s 1930’s American tour. She is also an actress who acted in more than twenty films and many television shows. For more detailed information of Soo Yong, see Yunxiang Gao, “Soo Yong (1903-1984): Hollywood Celebrity and Cultural Interpreter,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, no.17, (2010): 372–399.
 - 16 The recorded play is an episode of a traditional *Kunqu* (one major Chinese opera genre) “Killing the Tiger General” (Fei Zhen’e Cihu).The short clip is available as a YouTube clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WStGktr5plg> (accessed 22 September 2019).
 - 17 Qin Xiaolin, Yang Weiping 秦曉琳, 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], in *Dianying wenxue* 電影文學 [Movie Literature] vol. 15 (2009), 67.
 - 18 Laikwan Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema,” in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, eds., Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 56.
 - 19 Stephen Teo, “The Opera Film in Chinese Cinema: Cultural Nationalism and Cinematic Form,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.
 - 20 See Yeh Yueh-yu, *Cinema Journal*, 78-87.
 - 21 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 Y.Y. Yeh (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2018), 159.
 - 22 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.
 - 23 Wing-chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 72.
 - 24 Xue Juexian’s versatile in innovating traditional Cantonese opera and film probably related to his younger experiences of life background.
 - 25 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 (Lai Man-Wai) and next year transferred to Shanghai.
 - 26 See more in Moon Kwan’s autobiography *Zhongguo Yintan Waishi* 中國銀壇外史 [Unofficial

- History of the Chinese Silver Screen]. Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1976.
- 27 L. Ling-chi Wang, *Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States*. Daedalus, vol. 120, no. 2, (1991), 182.
- 28 Kwan's boss Luo Mingyou noticed the promising future of Cantonese talkie in Southeast Asia where has the biggest Chinese diaspora. In his reply to Kwan's telegram,
- 29 Laikwan Pang, *The Chinese Cinema Book*, 56.

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Abstract

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

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While maintaining a number of traditions, Chinese operas witnessed the development of a new visual and acoustic art form: the sound film. By introducing the three earliest Chinese talkies, Shanghai-made *The Songstress Red Peony* (1931), *White Golden Dragon* (1933), and San Francisco-made *Romance of the Songsters* (1933), this essay discusses an opera-film encounter in the early 1930s in different regions in and out of China. With a close observation towards the innate relationship between opera and film in Chinese theater culture, I argue that sharing same continuous tropes, stories, techniques and performers, early Chinese film-opera cooperation and negotiation served as an important cultural phenomenon among Chinese communities on a global scale.

Keywords

Chinese opera, Chinese sound film, Chinese diaspora, transnational perspective

