



**Jeremy E. Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia***

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IN THIS well-documented and groundbreaking study of Chinese dialect cinema, Taylor introduces to the readers an understudied Chinese film genre—“Amoy-dialect film” (*Xiayupian* 廈語片)—that remains part of the collective memory for those ethnic Chinese moviegoers who grew up in the cities of Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. This book goes far beyond reconstructing the historical past of this body of Chinese dialect movies. As promised in the title, the author seeks to participate in the academic debates concerning “Chinese transnational cinema” that began in the late 1990s, and to historicize issues of the geography of Chinese film production in Cold War Asia.

From 1948 to the early 1960s, Hong Kong movie studios produced over 240 Amoy-dialect films, half of which were filmed within the short period of three years from 1957 to 1959 (AFHK 2012, 206–259). The production and circulation of this collection of Chinese dialect movies manifests a unique character of boundary-crossing: it was largely financed by the overseas Chinese of Southeast Asia (and later Taiwanese; 26); produced in Hong Kong but rarely exhibited in the Colony, not to mention in mainland China during the Cold War era; and specifically targeted to an Asian regional market sustained by the diasporic Amoy-dialect (Minnanyu, Hokkien; xii) communities that were located in the Philippines (Manila), Peninsula of Malaya (Singapore and Penang), and Taiwan (Tainan, Chaiyi) (22). The author highlights the “transnational” identity and “non-place” quality of Amoy-dialect cinema, that “may well have grown out of established cinematic traditions which originated in China, found a base in Hong Kong and claimed markets in and funding from Southeast Asia, but it belonged to no single city, nation or indeed, ‘place.’ Instead, it was the product of a specific set of circumstances—geographic, political and economic—that relied on the growing ties between Hokkien-speaking communities beyond the shores of mainland China in the early years of the Cold War” (11). Such key arguments are established and developed in the core chapters and are well-supported by a wide range of historical sources and rich empirical data.

Chapter 1 addresses the fundamental question, “What does ‘transnational’ mean?” (4). The author starts by providing a succinct and useful survey of the scholarly discussions of the past decades about “transnationalism,” “transnational Chinese cinemas,” and “cosmopolitanism.” Interestingly, after reviewing the recent theoretical dialogues raised by major scholars in the field, such as Sheldon Lu, Chris Berry, Mary Farquhar, and Yingjin Zhang, Taylor makes the case that the Amoy-dialect film industry undermines many of the basic assumptions of transnationalism as the term is applied to contemporary film studies. The production of

this collection of dialect movies well predated the post-1978 development of the transnational media market. More importantly, Amoy-dialect cinema was at the same time “transborder” and “parochial” (14). The geography and history of this film genre challenges us to rethink existing theories of transnational cinema in particular, and Chinese cultural production during the Cold War in general (17).

Industry insiders were well aware of the “transnational character” of Amoy-dialect movies. In an interview conducted by the Hong Kong Film Archive, the late Wong Ching-ho (1919–2012), an actor who participated in the productions of the *Xiayupian* as early as 1948, recalled the network of production and circulation of the genre: filmed in the Hong Kong studios, “Amoy films were distributed abroad to these places: Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan. Most were distributed to the Philippines and Malaya, and were particularly well-received in Penang, Malaya” (AFHK 2012, 153). Evidently, this transnational network was well-established and recognized. A major contribution of the book under review is to highlight the importance of the Philippines’ investment that contributed to the prosperity of Amoy-dialect films in the 1950s. In Chapter 3 Taylor provides an original analysis of the financial connection between Manila’s Chinatown and Hong Kong’s “Little Fujian,” paying special attention to the business activities of Philippines-based investors, including Esteban Ngo (Hsin Kuang Film Company, Yi Zhong Company), Zhuang Mingshu (Jinan Company), and Shi Weixiong (Hua Xia Company) (34–39). To my knowledge, this chapter represents the first scholarly study devoted to analyzing the significance of Philippine-Chinese within the history of Chinese film production. This issue is further developed by Taylor in another article (TAYLOR 2012), where he argues that “Amoy-dialect films are by the Philippine-Chinese and for the Philippine-Chinese” (TAYLOR 2012, 65; my translation). However, *Xiayupian* declined and disappeared rapidly in the 1960s, and was forgotten in a world defined by nation-states and the relations between them (123).

A systematic study of the history of *Xiayupian* was initiated and advocated by the late Yu Mo-wan (Yu Muyun, 1930–2006), who laid the foundations of Amoy-dialect movie research in the 1990s when he was a research director at the Hong Kong Film Archive. Largely based on the film advertisements of the old newspapers, Yu’s research was published mainly in the form of brief notes (YU 1998; 2000; 2001). The Hong Kong Film Archive, which has continued to widen the scope of the project since Yu passed away, aimed to compile a comprehensive filmography of *Xiayupian* based on the daily advertisements published in the Chinese newspapers of Singapore-Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines. After the book under review was published in 2011, the archive published the AFHK, which consists of a collection of nine critical essays, transcriptions of oral history interviews, and most importantly, an annotated filmography of Amoy-dialect movies from 1948 to 1966. The two books are complementary and should be read together.

As indicated in the filmography in the AFHK, the two earliest *Xiayupian* feature films produced after World War II were *Xiang Feng Hen Wan* [A belated encounter] (1948) and *Po Jing Chong Yuan* [The air is cleared] (1948). Starring Lu Hong (1928–), a legendary figure in the history of Amoy cinema, these two movies re-

ceived funding from the Philippines-based Hsin Kuang Film Company (Esteban Ngo), and were directed by Bi Hu, who started his filmmaking career in Shanghai (AFHK 2012, 186–89). Taylor’s book, however, does not discuss these two historic productions in detail. TAYLOR (2012) refers to *Xiang Feng Hen Wan* as the “first *Xiayupian* film after World War II” that was funded and produced by Esteban Ngo (TAYLOR 2012, 68). Po Fung’s article fills the knowledge gap of this part of the history, revealing a unique practice of filmmaking in the Hong Kong studios during the late 1940s: “One Script, Two Versions” (Po Fung 2012a; AFHK, 36–37).

Based on the same screen script and thus the same storyline, two separate movies in two different Chinese spoken dialects—titled *Po Jing Chong Yuan* (Amoy) and *Xianggui Chun Nuan* [Warmth of home] (Cantonese)—were produced and shot in the studio simultaneously by the same production crew but with different casts (Amoy and Cantonese). Quoting the oral history of Wong Ching-ho, Po Fung describes such a “dual version” production made during the boom period of Amoy-dialect cinema: “Two casts were used in the same movie, with Amoy leads in the Amoy version, and Cantonese leads in the Cantonese version. Each shot was filmed twice, then everything dubbed and developed in the dark room.... Two versions were shot with the same equipment, which brought in two lots of revenue” (Po Fung 2012b). This was a clever and effective method of minimizing costs, given the low-budget constraints of Amoy movie production in the 1950s. In Chapter 3 of his book, Taylor points out that if a Hong Kong film company was unable to sell a particular film to distributors in Manila, Taipei, or anywhere else, it would simply not have enough capital to invest in the production of other films (40).

Lastly, film music is not on the research menu of Taylor’s book (for articles exploring the musical aspects of the Amoy-dialect cinema, see WANG Ying-fen [2012] and YU Siu-wah [2012]). At the same time, a noticeable strength of the book is reflected in its critical sensitivity in contextualizing the consumption of Amoy-dialect movies in the wider network of popular entertainment of the Hokkien diasporic communities during the Cold War. Furthermore, when analyzing the “modern Hokkien songs” featured in *Xiayupian*, Taylor argues convincingly that Hong Kong is portrayed as “heaven” in the “new Amoy-dialect movies.” As pointed out in Chapter 5, these film songs celebrate the modern joys of life in the British colony associated with playing mahjong, driving fashionable cars, visiting dancehalls, and gambling on horse racing at Happy Valley. In the same chapter, the book analyzes why Hong Kong is depicted as heaven in the new Amoy-dialect movies post-1959. To the author, such an imagination and construction represents the political sentiment of the Hokkien-speaking filmmakers in rejecting the new political map of Asia that was taking shape in the late 1950s. Through this map, the world became defined by dialect groups and origin rather than by citizenship and nation-state (86).

It should be noted that the theme (“Hong Kong is heaven! Hong Kong is wonderful!”) and the depictions of a “heavenly lifestyle” mentioned above are adaptations from another Chinese film song featured in the Mandarin movie *San Zimei* [Three sisters] (1957). Titled “Wonderful Hong Kong,” the song—which features the American pop song “Mambo Italiano”—is sung by Diana Chang Chung-wen

(Zhang Zhongwen 張仲文), the most well-known bombshell of Hong Kong cinema in the 1950s. Funded by the Asia Foundation of the United States, the Asia Film Company and its connected institutions, Asia New Agency and Asia Press, these were the products of a cultural Cold War (LAW and BREN 2004, 155–57). As Richard Stites suggests, the “heaven-hell” dichotomy was a typical rhetorical device used during the Cold War. Both the eastern and western camps used such a metaphor in their propaganda in order to contrast the lifestyles of the capitalist and communist worlds (YUNG Sai-shing 2009, 133). Whereas the book under review provides an in-depth analysis of the geopolitics of the Amoy-dialect cinema, *Xiayupian* after 1959 serve as a unique case in studying how Hong Kong was represented on the silver screen of various film genres, such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Amoy, and Hollywood movies during Cold War era.

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