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Research

My First Knock on the Door of Ji An Tang – Notes on the Conference on Minnan-dialect Film Culture

May Ng

On 24–25th October, I went to Amoy to attend the 4th Cross-Strait Conference on Minnan-dialect Film Culture co-organised by the Xiamen Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Fujian Film Association. But the beginning of the story of my relationship with the Minnan-dialect film has to be traced back to three years ago.

In 2011, the Hong Kong Film Archive officially launched a project on the study of Amoy-dialect film. I was a researcher on the project at the time, and was involved in sorting out relevant materials stored in the HKFA, and collecting newspaper clippings published in the Philippines and Taiwan. The next year, the HKFA published a special volume, *The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong*, which looks into more than 200 films that were made in Hong Kong between 1947 and the early 1960s, that were primarily distributed in Southeast Asia and Taiwan but seldom shown in Hong Kong. This large body of works later triggered the birth of the Taiwanese-dialect film in Taiwan.

In 2008, the Taiwan film *Cape No. 7* swept over the island like a strong wind, jumpstarting Taiwanese cinema that had lain dormant for a long time. The story of *Cape No. 7* is set in Tainan, and a sizeable part of the dialogue is in the Minnan dialect. The film communities in Minnan-dialect regions on the two sides of the Strait were inspired. In fact, *Cape No. 7* is by no means the only successful film in recent years that incorporates the dialect in its dialogue. *Seven Days in Heaven* (2010), *Night Market Hero* (2011), *Din Tao: Leader of the Parade* (2012) and others after it have also made use of a large amount of Minnan dialogue, and have received both critical acclaim and box-office success. The publication of *The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong* coincided with this rise of the wave of Minnan-dialect film. In this context of searching for the past roots of this dialect cinema and opening up new grounds for its development, I came upon this opportunity to take part in the discussion of Minnan film culture on the two shores of the Strait.

In addition to discussion, I attended a session in which Ray Jiing, Director of the Tainan National University of the Arts Image Restoration Project and his team, reported their attempts at restoring Taiwan's first ever 35mm Taiwanese-dialect film, *The Beggar-turned-Commander and His Devoted Wife* (1956), and screened the restored portions of the film. I also took the opportunity to visit Ji An Tang – the

famous Fujian Nanyin music society – whose name appeared frequently in the printed synopsis of many Amoy-dialect films that served as publicity materials in those years, and whose musicians took part in their production.

The imprint of Ji An Tang on Hong Kong-made Amoy-dialect films

The earliest appearance of the name of Xiamen Ji An Tang in the HKFA holdings is found in the two-part *Tang Bohu's Seduction of Qiuxiang* (1952–53). The advertisement on Part One is found in the 22 July 1952 edition of *Chinese Commercial News* published in Manila, where it was stated that the film came with 'musical accompaniment by the famous Minnan group Xiamen Ji An Tang'. On 6 August 1952, the advertisement on the same paper added this about the film: 'Production by Shi Zhenhua, the star of Nanyin and the master of the stage,' as well as another short passage about the musical feasts awaiting those who went to see the film. The printed synopsis of Part Two also mentioned that the film was graced by the presence of 'the team of Xiamen Ji An Tang'. Both Parts One and Two of *Tang Bohu* were produced by the Nanfeng Film Company established in Hong Kong by Wu Shi Heng, a Singaporean film distributor,¹ and starred Bai Yun, a Mandarin film actor, as Tang Bohu and the Nanyin aficionado Jiang Fan from Amoy as Qiuxiang. The films were so popular that they started a fad of Amoy Nanyin film.

The name Ji An Tang was also found in the publicity materials of later films, such as *Night Rains at Xiaoxiang* (1953), *The Romance of Lychee and Mirror, Parts One to Three* (1953–54), and *Snake Beauties, Parts One & Two* (1954). In the special publication that accompanied the screening of *Lychee and Mirror*, the director Chen Huanwen wrote in his 'Message from the Director': 'Particularly worthy of note is that the Nanyin musicians in this film, Chen Dingchen, Chen Jinmu, and Song Yun are all famous musicians of the Xiamen Ji An Tang. Even a bigger draw is Wu Shuiping who hurried from Manila specifically to play the music for this film...' The few musicians mentioned here also provided musical accompaniment for many other Amoy-dialect costume films, such as *Southeast the Peacock Flies* (1955, with Chen Jinmu), *The Cowboy and the Spinning Girl* (1955, with Song Yun and Chen Jinmu), *The Butterfly Lovers* (1955, with Song Yun and Chen Jinmu), *Two Sisters in a Turbulent World* (1957, with Song Yun), and *Lü Mengzheng Wins the Bride's Embroidered Ball* (1957, with Chen Dingchen, Chen Jinmu and Ji Jingzhen). Undoubtedly, Ji An Tang had played an important role in Hong Kong-made Amoy-dialect film.

On 23 October, I followed Mr Hong Buren, the famous Amoy folklore scholar to a market that was unreachable by car. We wove our ways through many narrow alleyways until we arrived at Hezaiqian, the address of Ji An Tang in the 1920s. The

original building when Ji An Tang found its home has been expanded a few times, and does not look anything like its original appearance. The bustle of city life in its vicinity is also at odds with the mellifluousness of Nanyin music. Yet, one could still imagine the vitality of Ji An Tang in its former years when it chose to implant itself in the midst of the masses.

Upon entering the main hall, one can immediately see the big wooden armchairs lining the two sides of the room. They were meant for the musicians. What catches the eyes even more is the altar placed in the middle of the room in honour of Meng Chang, the emperor of the Later Shu of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, who is venerated as the forefather of Nanyin music.

Ji An Tang at its beginning in the Guangxu period

Later, Ms Cao Xiaomi, the Chief Executive, and Mr. Hong Zhaorong, the Secretary-General of Ji An Tang gave me a rundown of the group's history.

The full name of Ji An Tang is Ji An Tang of Nanyin Music. It was established in 1883 (the eighth year of Guangxu's reign) at Rock Wanggao. Later, it successively moved to Guizhou Mound (now Shanzaiding), Tianzaiqian (now Nantian Alley) before making its home at its present address. Because the founders and the early members came from places that bear the word An, such as Anhai, Hui'an, Anxi, and Tong'an, the group thus called itself Ji'an.² Mostly from commercial, educational, official and administrative circles, the members are better educated and thus in a better position to pass on their art and knowledge to the younger generations, which made Ji An Tang a force to be reckoned with in the continuation of Nanyin music.

Over the years, Ji An Tang has produced many famous musicians, three of whom are renowned to be masters of Nanyin music. The first is Lin Xiangyu. The four volumes of *Scores for Nanyin Fingering* that he edited were published in 1914 with long-lasting influence. The second is Lin Jiqui. He completed and published six volumes of *Scores for Quanzhou Nanyin Fingering, Revised Edition* in 1921. Before his death in 1943, he finished another book *Selected Tunes from Nanyin* in 13 volumes. More recent is Ji Jingmou. In his musical career, he arranged and composed more than 500 Nanyin songs, and led a group of Fujian Nanyin musicians (made up mostly of Ji An Tang members) to perform in Beijing in 1957.

Making and distributing albums overseas in the 1920s

Mr. Hong Zhaorong pointed out specifically that beginning from the 1920s and 30s, through the arrangement of record companies and overseas Chinese, members of Ji An Tang recorded their music in albums. Sometimes they did the recording in Amoy, and sometimes the musicians were invited to record in Hong Kong, Taipei and other

places. The records were distributed across Southeast Asia, and sometimes could be found as far as western Europe.

The first record company to approach the Ji An Tang musicians was EMI from the United Kingdom, which came to Amoy in 1928 to record the Nanyin tunes. The musicians were then invited to Hong Kong to do a recording in 1931. Soon, EMI, Victor, Hindenburg and other companies competed to invite the Nanyin masters to have their music recorded. (See the special publication *110th Anniversary of Xiamen Ji An Tang of Nanyin Music* published in 1993). Through the albums, Nanyin music spread to various places in the world. Because of this, Ji An Tang enjoys some degree of international reputation. The reference made in the advertisement in *Tang Bohu's Seduction of Qiuxiang* that Ji An Tang is a famous Minnan group is no empty brag.

Musicians invited to teach Nanyin in Southeast Asia

However, the members of Ji An Tang these days are unfamiliar with this chapter of their own history. They have no idea that their predecessors participated in the production of Amoy-dialect films in the 1950s. They have almost no memory of the musicians mentioned above except Shi Zhenhua. According to Hong Buren, Shi Zhenhua was the Head of the Siming District of Amoy at that time. He was an appointed official. He was passionate about Nanyin, and his mastery over it was quite impressive. When the Mainland changed sovereignty in 1949, he came to Hong Kong, and proceeded to involve himself in the music and the shooting of Amoy-dialect films. He also introduced Jiang Fan (original name: Wu Chengyun) into the film circles. In later years, he moved to Taiwan where he taught Nanyin.

Besides Shi Zhenhua, many skilled musicians from Ji An Tang travelled overseas to teach Nanyin. At the end of the Qing dynasty, Lin Xiangyu arrived in Taipei where he taught for a number of years. After World War II, Ji Jingmou visited Hong Kong three times as a Nanyin teacher, and Wu Pingshui, who was mentioned in the special publication of *Romance of Lychee and Mirror*, spread Nanyin to the Philippines. According to *110th Anniversary of Xiamen Ji An Tang of Nanyin Music*, Wu Shuiping not only made records, but was also 'appointed to go to the Philippines to teach Nanyin for more than ten years.'

Ji An Tang's history is over 130 years old. There are currently 56 members. Even though it is much smaller in scale than it was in its heyday, it has remained active in and out of China despite the social and economic changes that it has weathered through the years. It has received occasional invitations for overseas exchange, testament to the enduring vitality of unofficial music clubs. Ji An Tang has left its name in the history of Hong Kong cinema, just as it has filled a gap in our understanding of the spread of Nanyin music to neighbouring areas. (Translated by Tam

King-fai)

Notes

¹ Chen Feng, 'From Jiang Fan to the Amoy-dialect Film', *Chinese Commercial News*, Manila, 5 March 1957 (in Chinese).

² The word Ji in the name Ji An Tang means 'to summon, or to bring together'.

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Portrait

Meeting Lu Ming in 1941

Sai Yee

On 14 January 1940, Lu Ming relocated from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Among those who came with her included Zhang Shankun and Tong Yuejuan – the couple who owned Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company; her elder sister and *wuxia* star Xu Qinfang; her brother-in-law and director Chen Kengran; and actress Yuan Meiyun. Thanks to her fluency in Cantonese, Lu had no trouble making a name for herself in Cantonese films, establishing herself as a refreshing star in prewar Hong Kong cinema.

(1)

Lu was originally named Xu Weiguan and was also known as Xu Maoyi. She was born on 12 March 1919 in Changzhou, Jiangsu and moved to Shanghai with her family at the age of four. Her father's interest in calligraphy and painting heavily influenced her while she also followed her sister Xu Qinfang's footsteps into Beijing opera. The elder Xu sister, who was 12 years older than Lu, attended China Film School and became an actress for Chen Kengran and associates' Youlian Film Company upon graduation. She rose to *wuxia* stardom in the 1920s.

In 1936, while Chen was directing *The Tides at Yangzhou* (1936) for Yi Hwa Film Development Company, then-17-year-old Lu replaced another actor in the last minute, thus making her screen debut. Yi Hwa swiftly signed Lu to a contract and cast her in *The Sentimental Woman* (1937), where her singing and acting performance as a club hostess with a hard knock life earned her widespread acclaim. She then acted in films such as *Women* (1937), *Tale of the Cinema City* (1939), *Women's Apartment* (1939), *The Mysterious Woman* (1939) and *Assassination of the Qin Emperor* (1940). Besides, Lu also starred in *The Amorous Ghost* (1938) and *The Wandering Beauty* (1939) for Guohua Film Company. However, the film industry was eventually brought to a halt by the war. In addition to aiding wounded soldiers at hospitals, Lu also participated in patriotic theatre troupes and song recordings while she was continuing her education.

Before the war, Hong Kong and Shanghai cinemas shared a close relationship. During Shanghai's 'Orphan Island' period – when it was encircled by Japanese force, many of Shanghai's film industry moved south to Hong Kong to continue their careers. As the situation in Shanghai worsened, Lu – who was very close to her sister

and brother-in-law – made the decision to move to Hong Kong in 1939.

(2)

Soon after Lu arrived in Hong Kong, she was featured in two period Mandarin films – *Revolt of the Fishing Folks* (1940) and *The Gardener and a Lady* (1940) – for Nanhua Film Company. Directed by her brother-in-law Chen and scripted by dramatist Hu Chunbing, *Revolt of the Fishing Folks* is an adaptation of a famous Beijing opera by Mei Lanfang. In the film, Lu played a homely girl whose unassuming beauty was adored by the audience. (Lu also starred in another Hu's film, *Lover of the World* [Guoguang production, 1941], which depicts a romance in the time of war.) *The Gardener and a Lady* centres on the events that lead to the marriage of the titular characters. The same year also saw the release of *Expedition to the East* – another film about the historical figure Xue Rengui ('The Gardener'), which focuses on the heroics of Xue's 18-year military career. The choices of material derived from the same character in these two films could not call for a more intriguing contrast.

After Nanhua dissolved, Lu joined Nanyang Film Company for six films. Her first gig for the company was still a Mandarin production – the HK\$200,000-budgeted period picture *The Marriage Trap* (1941), for which she played Lady Sun. But Lu's Hong Kong career finally hit its stride when she switched to acting in Cantonese films, which often featured her singing. In 1941 alone, seven of her films were released theatrically while *The Rich House* only hit the theatres in 1942 even though it was filmed in 1941 before the Japanese military invaded Hong Kong.

Lu's career turning point was her Cantonese debut *The Black Knight* (1941), which was adapted by screenwriter Mong Wan from his own popular novel. She played peppy double agent Lee Ching-mei opposite Ng Cho-fan's eponymous Black Knight in the commercial and critical sensation. Fresh off their previous success, the beloved duo worked side by side again in *Trials of Love* (1941). When Lu returned to Hong Kong after the war, her first film after the hiatus was her onscreen reunion with Ng, *The Black Hero and Lee Ching-mei* (1948).

Because of her soaring popularity, comedy director Lee Ying-yuen hired Lu to co-star with Cantonese opera maestro Sit Kok-sin in *Heavenly Union* (Lianyi production, 1941). Though if one were to pick her most revered role in this period, the Tang Xiaodan-directed *Boudoir Blues* (1941) must be the top choice. In this agonising tragic romance interspersed with light-hearted display, scenes of joy occur within a sorrowful environment that is marked by an undercurrent of sadness. (Lu's subsequent film, *The Rich House*, likely stemmed from the same narrative palette.) Lu's effervescence perfectly captures the naiveté of the young protagonist. She and leading man Cheung Wood-yau collaborated again in *The White Cloud Pagoda* (1941) and

The Rich House. At the time, Cheung was a young actor whose dashing good looks made him a fitting screen partner for Lu. The remake of *The White Cloud Pagoda*, which starred Butterfly Wu in the original 1928 version, highlighted Lu in male disguise in the film's advertisements.

From Lu's only remaining prewar film *The Rich House*, one can behold the warmth of the actress, who adorns the screen with her bright eyes and graceful manners. Writer Lui Lun's Clara is a self-assured character who is unfazed by her impoverished circumstances and carries herself cheerfully while brushing off the male protagonist's jealousy with her charm. Even when she is on the brink of becoming a fallen woman, she remains independent and steadfast without a hint of resentment. Even though her take on this character is sentimental, Lu avoids the clichés and manages to embody an unforgettable character.

Hong Kong was officially occupied by the Japanese military on 25 December 1941 – leading Lu to leave the city in March 1942. When she returned in 1947, she did not stay for long. For Great China Film Company, Lu starred in director Mong Wan's *The Black Hero and Lee Ching-mei*, Hu Xinling's *The Unmarried Mother* (1949) and two of Yeung Kung-leong's films – *Springtime in a Luxurious Hall* (1948) and *The Razor's Edge* (1949). After surviving the war, Lu came back looking a lot more mature and dignified.

(3)

When the Pacific War broke out, Lu left Hong Kong for the Mainland, where she worked in both film and theatre. In 1942, she became an actor for Central Motion Picture Studio in Chongqing. In 1943, she joined the Chinese Theatrical Art Association, acted in plays like Guo Moruo's *The Peacock's Gut* and toured with the company. After the war ended in 1945, it took her until 1946 before she found her way back to Shanghai. While she was an actress at Central Motion Picture Studio II, she starred in Tang Xiaodan's *Spring Dream in Heaven* (1947) and more. After her short stay in Hong Kong from 1947 to 1948, she returned to Central Motion Picture Studio II. She was then employed as an actor for Shanghai Film Studio in 1949. Lu was married to director Chen Xihe, with whom she had a daughter. Meanwhile, she had grown from being bashful and quiet to a capable speaker who could command a crowd's attention. In 1959, she became a performance instructor for Shanghai Film College. In 1963, she returned to Shanghai Film Studio. During the Cultural Revolution, she was subjected to humiliation and persecution in the form of struggle sessions. Reading and painting became her favourite pastimes after she retired in 1975. She died on 6 March 2001.

Among the many professionals of 1940s' Shanghai film circle who moved to

Hong Kong, some chose to return to China while others settled in Hong Kong. Thanks to a surviving copy of *The Rich House*, we are able to catch a glimpse of Lu in her prime, when she was active in Hong Kong cinema from 1940 to 1941. As we look back at some of the press related to Lu during that period, we can also get a sense of the community and attitudes of that era. For example, in ‘The Home of Lu Ming’ (*Art Land*, Vol 70, 15 March 1940), Lu was living not only with her sister and brother-in-law, but also Wang Cilong and Zhou Wenzhu – another filmmaking couple from the north. In ‘A Letter to Lu Ming from Manchukuo’ (*Art Land*, Vol 69, 1 March 1940), one can sense the shadow of espionage looming over the public. Lu, along with her fellow filmmakers who hailed from a similar background, instilled much vitality into Hong Kong cinema during their stay yet their contributions have not faded away because of their departure. We are fortunate to be able to savour their legacy, which has lived on in our history. (Translated by Francisco Lo)

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