

## **Essay Abstracts from *The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong***

### **A Sketch of Amoy-dialect Film Industry and Basic Characteristics of Its Output**

By Po Fung (Research Officer, Hong Kong Film Archive)

It is no easy task to study Amoy-dialect cinema since relevant resources have been scattered in many different places. Previous studies were mostly based on data that originated in Hong Kong. For a deeper and wider look into the subject, the Hong Kong Film Archive engaged a specialist to glean information from Singapore; on the other hand, our Research Unit had pored through old newspapers from Taiwan and the Philippines over the past year to look for clues. The result is a more comprehensive database, from which a more complete and accurate listing of Amoy movies has been compiled.

During our research, we gained an overview of the history of Amoy film industry that spanned a decade or so, which can be divided into three stages. We made a better sense of the financial backing, market situation, and production environment in these respective stages, as well as the boom and bust of the industry at large. Judging from the films available for viewing today, the majority of early titles were tragic costume folktales targeted for those who were more advanced in age and less educated. The audience base gradually broadened later, when contemporary romantic comedy and musical with a modern sensibility became the order of the day. The shortage of directors and scriptwriters was offset by the employment of talents from Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas, which however explains why Amoy cinema is devoid of any uniqueness that would set itself apart.

### **The Overseas Network of Fujian Emigrants and the Amoy-dialect Film Industry**

By Stephanie Chung Po-yin (Professor, Department of History, Hong Kong Baptist University)

Throughout Chinese film history, dialect films have always been inextricably connected with Hong Kong. This is not without historical reasons. Current data indicate that Hong Kong produced more than 400 dialect films (not counting Cantonese) in the 1950s and 60s, of which Amoy-dialect films accounted for over three-fifths. The method of operation of these films is most intriguing. After World War II, with funding from the Chinese communities in the Philippines, film companies in Hong Kong began to produce works that were shot in the Amoy dialect. Involved in these productions were mostly Fujianese actors and musicians from Mainland China. Because of cultural and political reasons, these films were seldom shown in Hong Kong or China, but were exported to the Chinese settlements in the Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore and other overseas Chinese communities. As Amoy

films began to create a fad, even Chinese businessmen in Singapore and Taiwan tried to get a share of the profit by financing their production in Hong Kong, making them all the more prominent. Amoy films thus brought together many overseas communities. Through Hong Kong, these films wove together a cross-regional production and distribution web, displaying a unique financial and cultural network.

### **The Amoy-dialect Film Industry and the Philippine-Chinese**

By Jeremy E. Taylor (Lecturer in Chinese Studies, School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield, UK)

This paper explores the relationship between the Manila Chinese and the Amoy-dialect film industry. It traces the roots of Chinese film exhibition in Manila in the 1930s, but also explores how the experience of Japanese Occupation in the Philippines led to an interest in the funding of Amoy-dialect films amongst Manila-based Chinese theatre owners in the late 1940s. Taking note of the Cold War context in which the Philippines, Taiwan and the Amoy-dialect film community in Hong Kong all found themselves on the same ‘anti-communist’ side of the early Cold War in Asia, it also examines the significance of Manila as a site of both film exhibition and financing, as well as a city to which Amoy celebrities frequently travelled throughout the 1950s to promote their works.

### **From the Peach Blossom Village to King’s Road: The Geography of Amoy-dialect Films**

By Yung Sai-shing (Associate Professor, Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore)

The story of Amoy-dialect film is a story about the inter-regional interactions amongst Southern Fujian communities in Asia. It is also a story of the rise and fall of Chinese dialect films. From 1947 to the end of the 1950s, Hong Kong film companies made more than 200 Amoy films. The number is impressive. The directors involved in the making of these films include names familiar to Hong Kong audience such as Ma Xu Weibang, Wong Tin-lam, Chow Sze-luk, Yuan Qiufeng and Chiu Shu-sun. Made by Hong Kong film workers, these ‘Hong Kong films’ were seldom shown in Hong Kong, but found their primary market in the Southeast Asian region, including Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Taiwan, the last of which being the production centre of Taiwanese-dialect film. On the basis of available documents and historical sources, this article attempts to trace the geographical and historical origin of Amoy films, and elaborate on how the conception of ‘place’ is transformed into images and scenes that appear in these films.

## **The Ten Years of the Intertwined Fate of Amoy- and Taiwanese-dialect Films**

By Huang Jen (Film researcher)

On the basis of years of research, I present in this article an account that is not known to many of the ten years of the intertwined fate of Amoy- and Taiwanese-dialect films. This article will comment on the difficulties Amoy cinema faced in its beginning phase in Hong Kong, the way Amoy film stimulated the rise of Taiwanese film, and the subsequent process by which the latter attempted to sideline the former. Having to deal with the fluctuations of the market, the two types of dialect films were engaged in competition for talents and topics, leading to works with similar themes coming from both camps.

Evidence suggests that very few Amoy films were shown in Hong Kong, but found their primary market in Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia where the Southern Fujian dialect was spoken. Not only were these films popular amongst the Fujian emigrants, they exerted significant influences on their way of life. They also nurtured talents for Mandarin films in Hong Kong. Seow Kuen, who starred in more than 70 Amoy films, later became the famous Ivy Ling Bo, an icon in Mandarin cinema that is the object of wild adoration amongst Taiwan moviegoers. All of the above points to the fact that the contributions of Amoy films to Hong Kong cinema are not to be overlooked and deserve a renewed understanding amongst Hong Kong people.

## **The Music of Amoy-dialect Period Films: The Case of *Nanguan***

By Wang Ying-fen (Professor, Graduate Institute of Musicology, National Taiwan University)

Music is an inextricable part of Amoy-dialect film, and *nanguan* music and musicians play an important role in its formation and development. No study, however, has been done on the music in these films. Using the audiovisual materials in the Hong Kong Film Archive collection and my personal collection of *nanguan* music albums as primary data, this article makes preliminary observations on the use of *nanguan* music in Amoy period films. It also touches on the use of other musical elements.

The music and songs in Amoy period films usually adopt pre-existing famous songs, either directly or with minor changes. Even though the same songs tend to be used repeatedly, the musical elements in fact come from a wide range of sources. In addition to *nanguan*, Western classical music and other Chinese instruments are also used, such as *zheng*, *guqin*, *pipa* and *suona*. Despite this, the songs in the earlier films are mostly *nanguan* music, while the later ones tend to favour *gezai* tune, with *nanguan* playing a subsidiary role.

## **The Music in 1950s Amoy-dialect Films: An Indicator of Cultural Interactions in Hong Kong**

By Yu Siu-wah (Associate Professor, Department of Music, The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

Hong Kong's reputation in the 1950s and 60s as the 'Hollywood of the Orient' is no exaggeration. Funds poured in from all over the world, notably Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Taiwan, for the mass production of films in Mandarin, Cantonese, Amoy and Chaozhou dialects, making Hong Kong the Dream Factory of a wide range of Chinese dialect cinemas. It is also in Hong Kong that the diverse talents, themes and music employed by these films became increasingly homogenised. This phenomenon is fully and clearly reflected in the development of Amoy-dialect cinema.

This article examines the comparatively new music style in the existing 11 titles of contemporary Amoy pictures in the Hong Kong Film Archive collection. Special attention has been paid to star actress Seow Kuen in Amoy cinema who first made her debut as a child, before she achieved mega-stardom as Ivy Ling Bo in Mandarin cinema in her cross-dressed persona, and became finally the leading lady again in her real gender.

The Amoy musical films before the massive success of director Wong Tin-lam's magnum opus, Mandarin musical *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960), constitute a neglected slice of Hong Kong cinematic history. His Amoy project *Shrews from Afar* (1958) should be scrutinised in a broader context together with other Mandarin musical films. This article also reveals the veiled discontent with Mainland politics in the songs and dialogues of Amoy films.

Amoy cinema is deeply influenced by its Mandarin counterpart in many ways such as screenplays and song numbers. Within the former is a vast body of Mandopop tunes by Zhou Xuan, Bai Guang and Wu Yingyin. Music and song numbers in Amoy and Cantonese cinemas are similar in that they are mostly translated, adapted, or assembled from different sources. From the process, one may discover how the age-old Chinese opera found its way into the modern medium of film, how Southern Fujian tunes with a distinctly regional flavour evolved into nightclub music, and how traditional Chinese gong and drum developed into jazz combo. Actively involved in the transformation is a rich pool of creative talents from both Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas. The case of Amoy film represents a highly unique chapter in the history of Hong Kong cinema before Mandarin film rose to prominence.

## **Wishes from Afar: A Glimpse of the South Seas Sentiments from Film Artefacts**

By Su Zhangkai (Film researcher and graduate of National University of Singapore)

To study a film, or a chapter in film history, one has to rely not only on the film itself but also other resources, such as publicity materials as well as other peripheral products. These can be broadly termed ‘film artefacts’. For a researcher on Amoy-dialect film, film artefacts are all the more important because the preserved film copies are far and few between.

The Southeast Asian countries constitute the major distribution network for Amoy films, a phenomenon that is not unrelated to the sense of community amongst the overseas Fujianese living in those countries. One can easily observe in many Amoy films not only a longing for ‘hometown’ they left behind, but also identification with the ‘home’ they had set up in their adopted place of abode – what I call the ‘South Seas Sentiments’. By making use of Amoy film artefacts from my personal collection, including printed synopses, newspaper advertisements and stories, albums and lyrics, and still shots of films, this article, with South Seas Sentiments as its focus, conducts a preliminary investigation of the way Southeast Asian nativism is displayed and highlighted in Amoy films through an analysis of diverse aspects such as their themes, settings, markets, songs, costumes, and the talents they employ.

## **Some Observations on the Adaptation Process of Amoy-dialect Films**

By May Ng (Project Researcher, Hong Kong Film Archive)

The production of Amoy-dialect films in Hong Kong first began in the late 1940s and went into a gradual decline in the 1960s. Over its short lifespan of just a decade or so, more than 200 titles were made, some adapted from Chinese opera and folklore classics, some inspired by Mandarin and Cantonese films of the day. In addition, reworkings of old films from 1920s and 30s Shanghai also constituted a considerable chunk. This can be attributed to the cultural background of the big players behind the scene who determined the creative directions for Amoy productions.

On the basis of audiovisual and textual materials available today, this piece examines the adaptation process of Amoy pictures, from such perspectives as choice of subject matter, creative intent and hands-on execution of the filmmakers. This is also an attempt to provide clues to what messages Amoy films, as opposed to mere duplication, are meant to carry as a cultural product.

(Translated by Tam King-fai & Elbe Lau)