

Essay Abstracts from *The Chaozhou-dialect Films of Hong Kong*

Some Observation and Understanding of Chaozhou-dialect Film

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

By referencing the filmography of Chaozhou-dialect cinema compiled by the Hong Kong Film Archive, supplemented with newspaper and magazine literature of the day and interview contents provided by the HKFA's Oral History Project, the writer attempts to map out the pattern and sequence of the development of Chaozhou-dialect film. Key study areas include: how Chaozhou-dialect film came about as a result of Amoy-dialect film; the backdrop against which Chaozhou opera film came into existence – the tremendous success achieved by the new adaptation of *The Story of Sixth Madam Su* and the trend of rendering Cantonese films in the form of opera in the mid-1950s. This article also traces the way in which Chaozhou opera films established themselves as the mainstream of Chaozhou-dialect cinema, heralding a bloom that lasted several years, as well as outlining the development and production practices of major Chaozhou-dialect studios, such as Tung Shan, Bian Sing, Chiu Ngee, Tai Lang and the Chaozhou-dialect film unit of Eng Wah.

Chaozhou-dialect Film and the Chaozhou Diaspora

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

Chaozhou-dialect productions experienced their heyday at the threshold of the 1950s and 60s, the result of a perfect marriage of right people, right place and right time – a core audience for Hong Kong's Chaozhou-dialect film formed by the overseas Chinese in Singapore, Malaya and Thailand. Essentially a dialect cinema, it enjoyed a stable market among the overseas Chaozhou populations. Its relatively small budgets and the steady flow of overseas capital made it a lucrative business, fetching good prices easily pushed up by the forces of supply and demand. Besides, business-savvy producers of Hong Kong rose to the occasion with ease, keeping their books in the black by availing themselves of the ready repertoire of screenplays, music scores, actors and musicians furnished by the Chaozhou opera troupes in Hong Kong. The influx of hot money gave rise to Tung Shan, Tai Lang and Chiu Ngee, a host of studios holding deep, intricate ties with Singapore, Malaya and Thailand. Precisely because of this special bond, the ebb and flow of capital investments from these Southeast Asian producers also determined the rise and fall of Chaozhou-dialect film production in Hong Kong.

‘A Native Sound is Worth a Million’: The Interaction between 1960s

Chaozhou-dialect Film Industries in China, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia

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

In 1960, when Kong Ngee Co Ltd (Singapore) distributed *The Story of Sixth Madam Su*, a Chaozhou-dialect film produced by Hung Tu Film Co, on the Malaya peninsula, it inadvertently created a sensation in the Chaozhou thespian, Yao Xuanqiu, who took Singapore and Malaya by storm. A string of Chaozhou opera troupes jumped on the bandwagon and brought out screen adaptations of the Guangdong Chaozhou Opera Troupe’s repertoire – popular hits such as *Chen San and Fifth Madam*, *The Story of Sixth Madam Su*, *Reunion through Window Sweeping*, *Meeting in the Reed Field*, among others, while record companies were busy applying themselves to recording and releasing Chaozhou-dialect film soundtracks. The Yao Xuanqiu craze contributed to a surge of funding from Southeast Asia into Hong Kong. Local Chaozhou opera troupes poured themselves into producing Chaozhou-dialect films, lifting the curtain on the Golden Age of Chaozhou-dialect cinema. It has been estimated that over 150 titles were produced by the Chaozhou cinema of Hong Kong in the 1960s. The emergence of robust markets for Chaozhou-dialect films in Singapore, Malaya and Thailand, as Shu Don-lok of Southern Film Co Ltd recalled, was inextricably linked to Beijing’s overseas Chinese policy at the time. This article offers a new perspective on the origins of the Yao Xuanqiu craze, tracing its beginning to the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia in 1955. Citing the examples of Chaozhou-dialect filmmaking of Sun Luen and Kong Ngee, and supported by literature preserved by the Hong Kong Film Archive and information extracted from the newspaper and magazine collection at the library of the National University of Singapore, the article provides an in-depth analysis of the production mechanism of Chaozhou-dialect films, and the interrelations between Mainland China, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in political and commercial terms.

The Time-transcending Singsong of Chaozhou: Seven Chaozhou-dialect Hong Kong and Mainland Co-productions at a Glance

By Lin Chunjun (Chaozhou opera expert in Mainland China)

The years between late 1950s and mid-1960s saw film companies of Hong Kong enter into collaboration with Chaozhou opera troupes and studios on the Mainland, spawning the release of seven Chaozhou-dialect films, including *The Burning of the Riverside Tower* (1960), *The Story of Sixth Madam Su* (produced by Hung Tu Film Co,

1960), *A Woman Sues Her Own Husband* (1961), *The Romance of Lychee and Mirror* (produced by The Roc Film Corporation, 1962), *How a Fearless Daughter Avenges Her Father* (1965), and the shorts, *Without Fear* (1962) and *Wong Mou Sang's Wine* (1962) (later compiled and re-released as a feature-length film). This article begins by briefly outlining background information about the production companies, opera troupes, screenwriters and directors, casts and synopses of the seven films. It then goes on to chart the backgrounds and actual conditions of the filmmaking processes using related reports and records in newspapers, magazines and books. In search of the genesis of Chaozhou-dialect film, the article also explains the story behind the making of the first Chaozhou-dialect film in its entirety, the considerations given to Chaozhou opera adaptations, the art of striking a balance between filmic and stage approaches to artistic representation in Chaozhou opera, thereby providing a wealth of clues to further the studies of Chaozhou-dialect film.

‘Su-sanity’: *The Story of Sixth Madam Su* and Its Cross-establishment Interactions in Singapore

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

The reform of Chinese operas that took place in the 1950s laid the foundation for the birth of Chaozhou-dialect cinema and paved the way for its advancement. Produced by Hong Kong's Hung Tu Film Co, *The Story of Sixth Madam Su* (1960) launched a craze in Southeast Asia, impacting the Chaozhou opera industries in the region in ways never before imagined. Released in Singapore in 1960, *Su's* influence on the city was unprecedented: a host of opera troupes began rolling out carbon copies of the folktale on stage, with establishments such as song stages, arts and cultural groups, nightclubs and even film companies losing no time to follow suit. The folk story of Sixth Madam Su would go on to be adapted for the screen by three different studios in a short span of four months. By examining six different establishments, including professional opera troupes, song stages, amateur music societies, newspapers, film companies and record companies, and illustrated by *Su*, this essay intends to give a preliminary account of how Chaozhou-dialect films set the Chaozhou opera industry in motion and produced a bumper harvest of over 100 film titles during the earlier half of the 1960s – the glorious Golden Age of Chaozhou-dialect cinema.

Three Variations on *Meeting in the Reed Field* on the Chaozhou Screen

By Louie Kin-sheun (Honorary Research Fellow, The Hong Kong Institute of Asian Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong)

The Hong Kong Film Archive collection houses audiovisual material of three Chaozhou-dialect screen adaptations, which bear the assorted official names of *The Innocent* (produced by Bian Sing Motion Picture Co, 1960), *A Wronged Daughter-in-Law* (produced by Tor Ying Film Co, 1960) and *Meet in the Wood* (produced by Hung Tu Film Co, 1962). All three films originated from the Chaozhou traditional operatic excerpt, *Meeting in the Reed Field*, which was in turn derived from *The Tale of the Leaping Carp* (in particular the excerpt, *The Reed Field*), a tale of marvels of the Ming dynasty, with both the story and the excerpt stemming from *Accounts of Filial Offspring*, the story plots of which were based on *The Book of the Later Han*. *Meeting in the Reed Field*, *Reunion through Window Sweeping*, *Meeting by the Well*, *Meeting in the Woodshed* and *Meeting in the South Mountains* are collectively known as ‘The Five Meetings’ in traditional Chaozhou opera. Since *Reed* would have been directly impacted by the reform of Chinese operas in the early 1950s, the three screen adaptations of the Chaozhou opera for discussion in this article should have been based on the post-reform version of *Reed*.

Meeting in the Reed Field was included in the repertoire of both the Chaozhou opera showcase in Beijing in 1959 and the performance of May 1960 in Hong Kong by the Guangdong Chiu Chow Opera Theatre. In the following year, two of the adaptations hit the screen in Hong Kong. In terms of contents, all the three versions have made varying degrees of adaptation to the original story plot: Tor Ying’s version (1960) revolved around the conflicts between the mother and her daughter-in-law; Bian Sing’s version (1960) boosted its entertainment quotient and populist appeal by introducing the subplot of the daughter-in-law being the object of covetous attention, which entailed a major reworking of the plotline; the third version, a short segment of *Swallows Greet the Spring* (produced by Hung Tu, 1962), was a documentary of the stage version. The rarity of three screen adaptations of *Reed* being released within three years not only attested to the immense popularity enjoyed by this traditional Chaozhou opera, but also a testament to the prosperous Chaozhou opera scene at the time.

Chaozhou Opera Music Accompaniment in Film and Stage: A Study of *The Chivalrous Songstress* and *How a Fearless Daughter Avenges Her Father*

By Lau Fok-kwong (Local Chaozhou music expert)

Chaozhou-dialect cinema enjoyed a prolific spell from 1955 to the 1960s, producing over 160 titles, with the bulk of them being opera art films. Though the decade-long craze died out as quickly as it started, the arduous efforts made by the cast and crew behind the production of Chaozhou-dialect film should not go unacknowledged. In

this essay, the writer expounds on the roles of theatrical music of Chaozhou opera in Chaozhou-dialect film, introduces basic concepts of Chaozhou music and different types of musical ensembles in Chaozhou music performance, as well as the cultural ties shared by Chaozhou cinema and Confucian music (a kind of music for the literati) of Hong Kong. The writer illustrates how orchestration of Chaozhou music heightens dramatic tension and creates artistic effects in film, using two exemplars from the genre, *The Chivalrous Songstress* (1961) and *How a Fearless Daughter Avenges Her Father* (1965), which both excelled at screen and operatic direction, music composition and acting. In addition, the writer also sheds light on the interactive influence of Chaozhou-dialect film and traditional theatre, opening a new chapter in the history book of the contribution the former has made to the latter.

On the Features of Chaozhou–Guangdong Musical Crossing in Hong Kong’s Chaozhou-dialect Cinema

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

The writer made an interesting observation while watching period Chaozhou-dialect films: if he turned off the soundtrack during viewing, Chaozhou-dialect films and their Cantonese counterparts could easily be thought of as one and the same, whether in visual composition or the structure and development of the plot! And incidentally, these are the common features shared by dialect films of Hong Kong cinema in 1950s and 60s – firstly, aural elements such as the dialects spoken in the films; secondly, the singing styles and selection of existing music recordings, which combine to produce a myriad of distinctive styles and identities of dialect cinemas. Going beyond the discussion of film, it suggests an antithesis between a ‘pan-China’ *lingua franca* and regional sounds in Chinese operas.

The ‘language’ discussed in this essay refers to the dialect used in the singing and spoken dialogues: firstly, different forms of speech, including the *zhongzhou yin* (official speech originated from the Central Plain) or dialects and regional varieties, musical instruments, *qupai* (literally ‘named tune’, the generic term for an existing melody used in traditional Chinese music), *banqiang* (rhythmic patterns of music), and music pieces used in opening, transition and closing; secondly, on-stage body languages, such as stage walks, body movements, eye movements and emotive gestures such as ‘water sleeves’; thirdly, interior and exterior sets that make up the physical scenery and wardrobes that fall within the frames; and lastly, the overall sound effects, including soundtracks of films.

These aural elements are a direct reflection of the intricate interplay between ‘Mandarin Chinese/Putonghua’ and regional dialects, raising the issue of ‘The

pan-China' (the Grand Unification) versus regional identities and characteristics. The focus of this essay is to examine the Hong Kong characteristics in Chaozhou-dialect cinema and their interrelations with the Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas in Hong Kong and on the Mainland, with emphasis tilted towards music and Chinese operas as informed by the writer's personal background.

Chan Chor-wai: the Meteor Trail of a Chaozhou Opera Supreme Divo on the Silver Screen

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

A homegrown supreme divo of Chaozhou opera, Chan Chor-wai starred in over 50 Chaozhou-dialect films – almost one-third of the total output of 160 titles – at the height of her screen career in the 1960s. However, her rise to fame was far from smooth sailing, the well-earned result of hard work and training through different stages of apprenticeship and mastership – from being taken under the tutelage of opera veterans in 1953 at the tender age of ten, to making her debut in Chaozhou opera and puppet theatre in 1956 and covering singing parts for Chaozhouese-dubbed films. It wasn't until the Chaozhou-dialect film craze kicked off in 1960 and the ensuing production frenzy that Chan followed the Xin Tian Cai Chaozhou Opera Troupe and joined the ranks of screen actors. In this tribute to an important person in Chaozhou-dialect cinema, the writer charts the early days of Chan Chor-wai's acting career in her extraordinary life in film, through revisiting her impressive array of screen personae: as Gao Wenju, the newly crowned Number One Scholar, in *Unchanged Hearts* (1961), her first claim to fame; as Lu You, the poet of the Southern Song dynasty, in *Phoenix Ornament* (1961), in which she evidently took a leaf out of Yam Kim-fai's acting book; as General Xue Pinggui in *The Red-Haired Steed* (1963), one of her signature works; as the princely poet Cao Zhi in *The Nymph of the River Lo* (1966), a favourite from her late career.

(Translated by Agnes Lam)