"Lichees and Mirrors: Local Opera, Cinema, and Diaspora in the Chinese Cultural Cold War"

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Abstract

This paper explores the fate of a southern Fujianese opera (*liyuanxi*) play that was reformed over the course of the early 1950s and eventually made into the first full-length film to be produced in southern Fujianese dialect (Minnanyu) in the People's Republic of China. It does this, however, in order to shed light on much wider battles that raged, from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, over control of a plethora of local and provincial performance arts on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and between pro- and anti-Communist community groups throughout the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. The story of this one particular play-cum-film—*Chen San Wuniang* (Chen San and "Fifth Daughter"; 1957)—highlights that it was often rapidly shifting Cold War geopolitics, rather than ideological content or quality, that determined the outcome of such battles.

Keywords: *Chen San Wuniang*, Chinese diaspora, Cold War, *liyuanxi*, opera films, opera reform, southern Fujian

Introduction

In southern Fujian Province today, one frequently hears mention of *nanyin* (南音) and its cultural cousin *liyuanxi* (梨园戏). Both of these mutually related traditions—the former a style of ensemble music acknowledged as one of "the oldest existing Chinese musical traditions,"[1] the latter "one of the oldest and most conservative forms of theatre in China"[2]—originated in southern Fujian. And provincial and municipal authorities there have spent significant time and funds in promoting them through public events, performance spaces, and regular visits by *nanyin* and *liyuanxi* troupes from Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia.[3]

None of this is new, however, for attempts to underline the link between southern Fujian and *nanyin* and *liyuanxi*—indeed, to claim these forms exclusively as the province's cultural patrimony—go back decades. In the 1950s, these traditions lay at the heart of a regionwide cultural struggle that was played out not just in southern Fujian itself but in theaters and cinemas throughout East and Southeast Asia. It is this struggle for control of southern Fujianese performance arts during the Cold War that forms the basis of this study.

This paper will explore how socialist China, under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), attempted to reinvent local performance traditions such as *liyuanxi* and, later, to circulate the fruits of such endeavors abroad in cinematic form. Such efforts were, of course, not unique to southern Fujian. This region was particularly salient in the 1950s, however, for developments

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[1] Wang Ying-fen, "The Transborder Dissemination of *Nanguan* in the Hokkien Quadrangle before and after 1945," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 25, no. 1 (2016): 58–85.
[2] Josh Stenberg and Zhang Jingjing, "Scholar Dong and Madam Li Step Out: Are There National Audiences for Chinese Regional Theatre?" *Theatre Research International* 40, no. 1 (2015): 56.
[3] Wang Mingming, "'Great Tradition' and Its Enemy: The Issue of 'Chinese Culture' on the Southeastern Coast," in Tan Chee-beng, ed., *Southern Fujian: Reproduction of Traditions in Post-Mao China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006), 1–34.

here fed directly into overseas Chinese, foreign, and even defense concerns. During the entire Maoist era, southern Fujian served as the military frontline of the People's Republic of China (PRC) against Nationalist Taiwan, while concurrently representing the "ancestral homeland" for a significant southern Fujianese diaspora spread across a range of colonies and newly emerging nation-states. Indeed, by the mid-1950s. some 30% of all the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia could claim a southern Fujianese heritage, and there were significant Fujianese populations in Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, and the Philippines.[4]

In recent literature, a number of scholars have acknowledged the residual legacy of pre-1949 forms of folk culture in socialist China. Chang-tai Hung, Barbara Mittler, and Paul Clark have all underlined the importance of (in the parlance of the CCP itself) "feudal" precedents in officially sponsored socialist cultural production after the “Liberation" of China, while stressing the need to look back beyond the 1949 threshold to fully appreciate the origins of post-1949 culture.[5] In turn, such work has inspired scholarship on the adaptation of pre-1949 forms in various fields of cultural production, from comic books to drama, in the young PRC.[6] A number of important studies by Xu Lanjun and Walt Idema on the reform, commercialization, and export of Chinese opera in and from the PRC have also shown how local cultural traditions were

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[4] Lynn Pan, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 31.

[5] Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[6] For a recent example of the former, see Rebecca Scott, "'Seizing the Battlefield' in the Face of 'Guerilla Vending': The Struggle over the Dissemination of *Lianhuanhua*, 1949 to 1956," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 136–71; for an example of the latter, see Brian DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

worked into the application of what we now call "soft power" in this same era.[7]

This paper seeks to build on, but also complicate, this nascent literature. To date, most research has tended to focus on the *national* level and the deployment of provincial artistic forms in the creation of a "new China." Far less has been written, however, on the incorporation of socialist elements into local traditions, particularly in regions of China that represented the sites of origin for significant diasporic communities. How did Liberation lead not only to new conceptions of Chinese culture but also to new understandings of Cantonese, Chaozhou, or Fujianese identity, for example? What attempts were made to promote such identities beyond the borders of the PRC? And how did provincial forms of Chinese cultural production become realms of Cold War contestation?

In this paper, I will demonstrate not only the fundamental changes that southern Fujianese performance traditions underwent in the context of Liberation but also how the CCP attempted to utilize these traditions at the national level to counter a perceived Nationalist Chinese threat among southern Fujianese communities abroad—a threat emanating from colonial Hong Kong and US-allied Manila as much as from Taipei. Building on earlier research on the role of Hong Kong–based, anti-Communist Fujianese émigrés in Hong Kong in the production of Amoy-dialect movies (廈語片 *Xiayupian*),[8] many of which incorporated elements of *nanyin*, this paper will show how socialist China, too, resorted to provincial forms to spread its influence among the diaspora. This culminated in the production and eventual export of at least one opera movie

[7] Lanjun Xu, "The Southern Film Corporation, Opera Films and the PRC's Cultural Diplomacy in Cold War Asia, 1950s and 1960s," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 239–82; Walt Idema, *The Metamorphosis of "Tianxian Pei": Local Opera under the Revolution (1949–1956)* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014).

[8] Wu Junyu, ed., *Xianggang Xiayu dianying fangcong* [Traces of Hong Kong's Amoy-dialect films] (Hong Kong: Xianggang dianying ziliaoguan, 2012).

based on the *liyuanxi* canon in the mid-1950s. This was *Chen San Wuniang* (陳三五娘 Chen San and "Fifth Daughter"; 1957), a film made to challenge the commercial success of a Hong Kong–produced series of films entitled *Lijing yuan* (荔鏡緣 Lichees and mirror; 1953–1954).

In terms of sources, this paper draws on archival records in the PRC, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom and complements these with reference to rarely used ephemeral material such as newspaper articles, film advertisements, and handbills published in various parts of Asia. Structurally, it is informed by Idema's groundbreaking study, *The Metamorphosis of Tianxian Pei*.[9] In that book, Idema demonstrated how a close reading of the reform and transformation into film of a single folk opera can shed light on a host of wider issues, ranging from the residual appeal of pre-Liberation forms of entertainment in the PRC to the state's engagement with the diaspora. Indeed, as I shall discuss below, *Tianxian pei* (天仙配 Married to a heavenly immortal; 1955) and *Chen San Wuniang* are similar insofar as both were PRC-produced films based on reformed plays that (as we shall see below) came to have an influence on commercial filmmaking in Cold War Hong Kong and Taiwan.[10] Nonetheless, the complex history and very different fate of each of these plays-cum-films have the potential to deepen our understanding of the Byzantine cultural politics of the Chinese Cold War, as well as our interpretation of the wider, decades-long competition for ownership and control of regional and national traditions both in China itself and throughout the Chinese diaspora.

Reforming *Liyuanxi* under Socialism

[9] "Tianxian pei" was a traditional Chinese folk story, the reformed Huangmei opera version of which was transformed into a highly popular film in the PRC in the 1950s.
[10] Idema, *Metamorphosis*.

The events of 1949 drove many southern Fujianese theater practitioners to leave mainland China; some went to Southeast Asia, but many went to the "Little Fujian" community of Hong Kong. This saw some *nanyin* and *liyuanxi* troupes—such as the Xiamen-based Ji'antang (集安堂), a *nanyin* association that dates to the late nineteenth century, claiming decades of history—essentially split in two: some performers continued their art in exile and often developed performance traditions along quite different trajectories from those followed by former peers who stayed in the PRC.[11] It was this community of exiled *nanyin* and *liyuanxi* artists in Hong Kong that would come to provide, from the early 1950s onward, the cheap labor needed for the Hong Kong–based Amoy-dialect film industry.[12] Later in the decade, as we shall see, this industry came into direct competition with Fujianese cultural production emanating from the PRC.

As recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, this period also marked the start of a major effort to reorganize regional performance traditions all over the PRC and to harness the popularity of local opera forms for the benefit of the revolution, a highly political process that has already been explored in some depth by scholars such as Brian DeMare and Siyuan Liu.[13] From such reforms would emerge an entire genre of PRC opera films; 115 such films, based on a range of local and provincial forms, were produced in the period between 1953 and 1966.[14] This included the much-studied Shaoxing opera (越剧 *Yueju*) film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (梁

[11] On this, see Wang Ying-fen, "Transborder Dissemination of *Nanguan*," esp. 64.
[12] Jeremy E. Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-Dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011), 41–49.
[13] DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army*. See also Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 3 (October 2009): 387–406.
[14] Judith T. Zeitlin, "Operatic Ghosts on Screen: The Case of *A Test of Love* (1958)," *Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (2010): 220–55.

山伯祝英台 *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai*; 1954), which came to be celebrated as an example worthy of emulation by regional opera troupes all around the country in later years.[15]

Like their peers elsewhere in China, southern Fujianese performers were invited to Beijing in 1952 to take part in a regional opera festival.[16] Consolidation of "government-assisted" opera troupes—usually referred to as "experimental" troupes[17]—also occurred in this period, and in southern Fujian this manifested itself in the creation of bodies such as the Fujian Provincial Liyuanxi Experimental Troupe (福建省梨园戏实验剧团 Fujiansheng liyuanxi shiyan jutuan) in 1951,[18] as well as in the convening of a conference on the reform of Fujianese theatrical forms in October 1952.[19] In the early 1950s, *nanyin* and *liyuanxi* practitioners in southern Fujian also began looking for original stories that could respond to the emerging national popularity of the Shaoxing opera *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai*. They settled on *Chen San Wuniang* as the appropriate play in 1953.

Chen San and Fifth Daughter

Chen San Wuniang is one of the most celebrated plays in the southern Fujianese, Chaozhou, and Taiwanese operatic repertoires.[20] The story is also closely linked to questions of provincial pride

[15] Lanjun Xu, "The Lure of Sadness: The Fever of *Yueju* and The Butterfly Lovers in the Early PRC," *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 1 (2016): 104–29.
[16] Paola Iovene, "Chinese Operas on Stage and Screen: A Short Introduction," *Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (2010): 185.
[17] William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Eleck, 1976), 234.
[18] Sun Xingqun, *Qiangu juechang: Fujian nanyin tanjiu* [Study of Fujianese nanyin] (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 204.
[19] Wu Jieqiu, *Liyuanxi shilun* [On the history of *liyuanxi*] (Taipei: Shi hezheng jijinhui, 1994), 481.
[20] Josh Stenberg, "Repertoire Is Technique: Programming Transmission at a Xiqu Festival,"

and Fujianese self-expression.[21] A number of variants of this story were published in the nineteenth century, and it is likely that the story was also performed widely in that period in various musical and operatic traditions.[22] In the early decades of the twentieth century, the story was used as the basis of film plots; *Lijing zhuan* (荔鏡傳 Story of the lichees and the mirror), produced in 1926, marked only the first of a number of silent and (later) sound films made from then until the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.[23]

Despite a number of variations, the basic plot of *Chen San Wuniang* is a relatively uniform one, representing a variation on a common trope in the Chinese literary tradition, that of the *caizi jiaren* (才子佳人 scholar and beauty). Set at the end of the Song dynasty (though some versions date it to the Ming dynasty), it is the story of an affair between Wuniang (五娘 "Fifth Daughter"), the daughter of a wealthy Chaozhou family, the Huangs,[24] and Chen San, a scholar from Quanzhou. The two meet by chance in Chaozhou, through which Chen San is passing during the Lantern Festival one year while accompanying his brother, who is on his way to sit the imperial examinations. Chen San and Wuniang see each other as both are admiring Chaozhou's lanterns, and they fall in love. Unfortunately, Wuniang is also seen by the son of the well-to-do Lin family during the Lantern Festival. Overwhelmed by Wuniang's beauty, Lin seeks

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Theatre Topics 26, no. 1 (2016): 117–29.

[21] On this point, see Guoting Li, *Migrating Fujianese: Ethnic, Family and Gender Identities in an Early Modern Maritime World* (Boston: Brill, 2016), esp. 132.

[22] Multiple variations of the story appear in printed form, for example, among the extensive collection of undated song books published by Fujian-based *nanyin* troupes in this period and now held in the Piet van der Loon collections at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

[23] Hong Buren, *Xiamen dianying bainian* [One hundred years of Xiamen cinema] (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 2007), 79–80.

[24] I am indebted to Robert Fox, "Taiwanese Opera in English: Translating Liao Chiung-chih's Chen San Wu Niang," *Taiwan xuezhi* 8 (2013): 1–27, for some of the terms used in this synopsis.

to arrange a marriage with her. His subsequent request is supported by Wuniang's father, who is impressed by the wealth of the Lin family. Despite this, Chen San remains so fixated by Wuniang that he travels back through Chaozhou en route to his home in Quanzhou in the hope of seeing her again. In Chaozhou, Wuniang spies Chen San from her balcony and tosses a sprig of lichees to him as a sign of her affection. Moved by this act, Chen concocts a plan to enter the Huang household so that he may see Wuniang again and express his love for her. He does this by pretending to be a professional polisher of mirrors, deliberately breaking a valuable mirror belonging to the Huangs so that he may work in servitude in the Huang household and be close to Wuniang. The plan works, in that Chen is indeed forced to work for three years in the Huang house. During this time, however, he rarely interacts with Wuniang and must watch as preparations for her marriage to the Lin son progress. He loses faith in Wuniang's love for him after finally speaking to her after six months of servitude. Believing he has little hope of marrying Wuniang, Chen San considers returning to Quanzhou alone. His only connection to Wuniang is via a fellow domestic worker in the house, Wuniang's maidservant Yichun (益春). Yichun plays the role of a clandestine matchmaker for the two, encouraging Chen San to express his love for Wuniang through poetry and delivering Chen San's subsequent expression of love to Wuniang. It is also Yichun who succeeds in physically stopping Chen San from leaving by refusing to hand over his umbrella; the struggle over this object is one of the dramatic high points in operatic interpretations of the story. Yichun's intervention means that the couple reconcile and elope to Quanzhou.

From a socialist point of view, the plot of *Chen San Wuniang* resonated with a number of policies that had been introduced in the early 1950s. Class relations, and particularly the relationships among scholars (Chen San), the "feudal elite" (the Huang family), and the

proletariat (Yichun) were a defining feature of the story, and it took but a slight stretch of the imagination to see in the scion of the Lin family a pre-Liberation landlord. Most important of all, however, was the story's relevance for the PRC's 1950 Marriage Law. "The story of this play reflects the opposition of the people in this region [i.e., southern Fujian and Chaozhou] to feudal rites [i.e., marriage]," argued one study of the story.[25] The *Xiamen Daily* (厦门日报 *Xiamen ribao*) came to the same conclusion, claiming that "the reason so many from the older generation love this play is that it… brings a ray of hope to those who oppose feudal marriage."[26]

From 1951 onward, the *liyuanxi* version of this story was the subject of intense debate in Fujian. This eventually led to the publication of a suitably socialist script in 1954. In turn, this reformed script was, in 1957, turned into a film that was then exported.

From its first post-Liberation interpretation in 1951 to its transformation into a film in the winter of 1956–1957, however, the *liyuanxi* version of *Chen San Wuniang* was in a constant state of flux. While recent scholarship on southern Fujianese performance traditions has stressed the need to "valorize their practice as living theatres" and to acknowledge change as a natural process that all living traditions undergo,[27] the process of opera reform experienced in Fujian in the mid-1950s was—like cognate processes elsewhere in China—highly politicized. Indeed, a good deal of work was required for *Chen San Wuniang* to be turned into both a socialist text *and* an exportable Fujianese equivalent to *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*.[28] Chen Yaqian (陈雅谦)

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[25] Guo Liang, *Chen San Wuniang de liangzhong xingxiang chuli* [On dealing with two images in *Chen San Wuniang*] (Beijing: Baowentang, 1959), 2.

[26] Lao Xiu, "Tan tan Chen San Wuniang zhong de 'xiu guluan'" [On “embroiding a lone *luan* bird” in *Chen San Wuniang*], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], March 4, 1955.

[27] Stenberg, "Repertoire is Technique,” 126–27.

[28] And the parallels between the two were commonly remarked upon in press articles seeking to promote the *liyuanxi* version. See, for example, "Chen San Wuniang zai Hu kaipai" [Filming

gave an account of this process that claimed the reform of the play was made in two specific areas: the removal of scenes deemed ideologically problematic and the "strengthening" of certain core characters.[29] In actual fact, these two aspects were closely related, for the development of specific characters in the story called for significant changes to the way in which the play was performed.

Opera reformers betrayed a particular interest in developing the female character of Wuniang, for instance; an entire study of this issue was published.[30] Downplaying pre-1949 tendencies to dwell on this character's beauty—a practice that may not have seemed appropriate in a new, revolutionary context—Wuniang was reinvented in the early 1950s as a headstrong young woman who showed far greater agency than earlier versions had permitted. Scenes from pre-1949 versions that had portrayed her in a more subservient role were removed altogether. Similarly, the Lin scion, "Lin Da" (林大 Big Lin), was transformed from what had been a "clown prince" (公子丑 *gongzi chou*) role, performed with exaggerated movements and designed to elicit audience amusement, into a "tyrant" (恶霸 *eba*) who would evince hatred (rather than derision) from spectators.[31]

One of the initial figures involved in such reforms was the *liyuanxi* practitioner Cai Youben

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starts on *Chen San Wuniang* in Shanghai], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], February 27, 1957.

[29] Chen Yaqian, "Lijingji de sixiang neihan ji Chen San Wuniang gushi de yanbian" [Ideological connotations of *Lichees and Mirror*, and changes to the story of *Chen San Wuniang*], *Quanzhou shifan xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Quanzhou Normal University] 29, no. 1 (2011): 7–14.

[30] Guo, *Chen San Wuniang de liangzhong xingxiang chuli*. This study compared the reform of characters in the *liyuanxi* opera with the same process occurring in a Chaozhou opera based on the same story.

[31] Li Si, "Liyuan de biaoyan yishu wenti" [Problems with the artistic performance of *liyuanxi*], *Xiamen ribao* (Xiamen daily), November 25, 1953.

(蔡尤本 1899–1974).[32] Indeed, all of the scripts published in the 1950s bore Cai's name.[33] Cai was an obvious choice for this task. He not only was one of the few of his generation of *liyuanxi* performers *not* to flee to Hong Kong or Southeast Asia but also hailed from an acceptable class background, apparently being illiterate, coming from a "poor peasant" family, and having been sold into servitude to an opera troupe as a child in the dying days of the Qing dynasty.[34]

While Cai was called upon to provide direct knowledge of the opera, however, it was a team of CCP cultural cadres who oversaw the opera's actual reform. For the script's first iteration, published in 1952, for example, Cai had worked with a Quanzhou-based CCP cadre and member of the Xin Wenyi group called Lin Rensheng (林任生 1912–1972). According to recent studies published by Fujian provincial officials, it was Cai and Lin who were responsible for making some of the first major changes to the play. They shortened it from a ten-hour performance to a four-hour one, for example, by significantly reducing complex dialogue while maintaining many of the original arias.[35]

More extensive changes were made, however, in 1953. The team responsible for this second round of reforms was led by a former mayor of Quanzhou, Xu Shuji (许书纪 1914–2008). Xu claimed a unique combination of skills, ideology, and cultural capital that made him perfect for this role. Born in southern Fujian, he had taught for a time prior to the Second World War in

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[32] For more on Cai's role, see Chen, "Lijingji de sixiang neihan ji Chen San Wuniang gushi de yanbian."

[33] Huang Wenjuan, "Xigai shiqu de 'Chen San Wuniang'" [Chen San Wuniang during opera reform], *Fujian yishu* (May 2015): 32–36.

[34] "Cong liyuan de daoyan shuodao lao yiren Cai Youben tongzhi" [On the old performer Comrade Cai Youben, from the point of view of theater direction], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], October 25, 1953.

[35] Huang, "Xigai shiqu de 'Chen San Wuniang.'"

Chinese-vernacular schools in the Philippines, returning to China during the war to work in patriotic drama troupes.[36] Xu's team shortened the opera even further in 1953 and initiated major reforms to the play, including the above-mentioned character changes and the removal of scenes deemed inconsistent with these. It was this round of reforms that led to the play being transformed into a text that was ideologically acceptable for mid-1950s China.

Not *all* of these changes were ideological, however, for new aesthetic standards were also beginning to find their way into the play in this period, possibly as a result of influence from reforms that were occurring in parallel performance arts elsewhere in China. In the 1954 script, for instance, Wuniang was dressed in "palatial robes" (宮裝 *guzhuang*) rather than the simpler skirt and robe with which she had been adorned in the earlier round of reforms. In styling her hair, reformers similarly returned to a pre-1949 practice of elaborately wrapping Wuniang's hair and draping a red cord from her head.[37]

Cai Youben's Fujian Provincial Liyuanxi Experimental Troupe performed the subsequent officially sanctioned script in various parts of China in 1954, and a short-lived interest in the story beyond the region developed as a result.[38] More crucially, and despite the return of potentially "feudal" aesthetics, this version found favor with policymakers, winning a series of prizes at the East China Theater Festival in 1954.[39] Cai and Xu had thus successfully crafted a

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[36] Biographical details about Xu Shuji can be found in Wang Wei, "Fujian xiqu gaige yu gujin lijing qingyuan" [Fujianese opera reform and versions of *Lichees and Mirror* through the ages], *Yiyuan* (December 2016): esp. 17.

[37] Huang, "Xigai shiqu de 'Chen San Wuniang,'" 36.

[38] This included a rewriting of an illustrated novella in November 1955. See Yu Ren, *Chen San Wuniang* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 1955, 1983). An illustrated book of the story, seemingly based on pre-1949 publications, was also produced in this period. See Yang Xialin and Kong Jizhao, *Chen San Wuniang* (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1956).

[39] Wu Jieqiu, *Liyuanxi shilun*, 481–82.

play that, in true Maoist style, balanced the need to valorize "the motherland's precious cultural heritage" while "reflecting the hatred and opposition of the toiling masses to the feudal ruling classes"[40]

The Amoy-Dialect Challenge

Thus far, my analysis of *Chen San Wuniang* in post-1949 Fujian has followed a standard trajectory common in cultural histories of the PRC, one of attempts to mobilize pre-1949 folk culture in the service of socialism. However, it is crucial to remember that such reforms were occurring not simply in the context of changes on the Chinese mainland but also in parallel with commercially and politically driven reforms to the same traditions *beyond* the PRC.

In particular, the PRC rescripting of the *Chen San Wuniang* story occurred only *after* the Asia-wide release of a series of three black-and-white movies based on this same story that were made in Hong Kong in the winter of 1953–1954 and financed by Manila-based theater owners. This series of films, produced under the title *Lijing yuan*, represented the start of a commercial craze in Southeast Asia for *nanyin* films (南音電影 *Nanyin dianying*) made by Fujianese émigrés who had fled mainland China in 1949. This community would come to populate a lively Amoy-dialect film industry, politically backed by Taipei and its Hong Kong and Kowloon Filmmakers Free General Filmmakers Association (自由總會 *Ziyou zonghui*), through the early 1960s.[41]

The Hong Kong filmic version of the story, shot at the Grandview Studio (大觀片場 *Daguan pianchang*) as well as on location in rural Hong Kong in 1953, was markedly different

[40] Both expressions are taken from "Chubanshe de hua" [Note from the publisher], in Cai Youben, et al., *Chen San Wuniang (liyuanxi)* [*Chen San Wuniang* (*liyuan* opera)] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1955), unpaginated.

[41] On this, see Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas*.

from the one being developed on the mainland. Many of these differences reflected commercial concerns on the part of the films' financers. The decision to produce a series of three films rather than a single picture, for example, helped minimize risk while allowing financers to divert money made from the first installment into the funding of the next.[42] The ending chosen for this series of films also represented a commercial choice. Like many Amoy-dialect films, the *Lijing yuan* series was a tragedy.[43] Happy endings were rare in the Amoy-dialect films, as they were in the *nanyin* stories upon which they were based.[44] *Lijing yuan* ends not with elopement to Quanzhou but with the arrest of Chen San and Wuniang and their subsequent suicides (by jumping into a well). Yichun outlives the hapless couple in this version, but only to give birth to a child she bears to Chen San. This child is brought up by Yichun to be a studious young man who eventually passes the imperial examinations, becomes an official, and investigates his father's death. Lin is found guilty of murder, and the story ends as Lin dies from self-inflicted wounds, banging his head against a wall out of guilt and regret.[45]

This series of films was produced by Yi Zhong Gongsi (一中公司), a Hong Kong–based film company financially backed by the Manila-based theater manager Esteban Ngo (伍鴻卜 Wu

[42] Zhong Baoxian, "Minqiao de haiwai wangluo yu Xiayu dianying ye" [Networks of the overseas Fujianese, and the Amoy-dialect film industry], in Wu Junyu, *Xianggang Xiayu dianying fangcong*, 50–61.

[43] On the commercial appeal of tragedy, see Zhen Zhang, "Ling Bo: Orphanhood and Post-war Sinophone Film History," in Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *Chinese Film Stars* (London: Routledge, 2010), 121–38.

[44] On *nanyin*, Stephen Jones suggests the following: "Texts are often mournful, depicting the sufferings of women: love, separation, and exploitation." Stephen Jones, *Folk Music of China: Living Instrumental Traditions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 309.

[45] These details can be found in Anonymous, *Lijing yuan tedaben* [Extended program for *Lichees and Mirror*] (Hong Kong: Yuandong wenhua gongsi, 1953), PR 3126X, Hong Kong Film Archive.

Hongbu). The scripts for *Lijing yuan*, however, were written by one of the most prolific actors in the Amoy-dialect industry, Wang Qinghe (王清河 1919–?). Wang was typical of many members of the émigré community in Hong Kong's "Little Fujian," having left southern Fujian for Hong Kong just prior to the Communist victory of 1949 (and just as commercial Amoy-dialect films were starting to be made in the colony).[46] Wang claimed to have written the script for this series of films single-handedly in 1953 (just as the reform of the *liyuanxi* version was occurring in the PRC). He enlisted southern Fujianese *nanyin* performers in Hong Kong to provide music for the films.

It was in characterization and casting that the differences *and* some similarities between *Lijing yuan* and the reformed *liyuanxi* were most apparent. The villain Lin, for example, was given a different name and a quite different part in the Hong Kong version. Lin Dai (林玳) was presented as a "person who relies on the strength of others to bully the weak" (持勢凌弱 *chishi lingruo*), his ugliness accentuated with the addition of a large, false nose. His part was played by the scriptwriter Wang Qinghe himself, a man of small stature.[47] Similarly, Hong Kong filmmakers had no qualms about highlighting the beauty of Wuniang, casting the "queen of Amoy-dialect films" (廈語片影后 *Xiayupian yinghou*), a Quanzhou native called Jiang Fan (江帆 dates unknown), in the lead role. Far from being a headstrong character, she played a Wuniang who was "tender and quiet" (柔情文靜 *rouqing wenjing*). Intriguingly, however, advertising literature for *Lijing yuan* shows that Jiang Fan was styled in a manner not

[46] Wang Qinghe, interview by Yuen Tsz-ying, Kwok Ching-ling, and Wong Ain-ling, October 29, 2002, unpublished transcript, Hong Kong Film Archive.
[47] Wang Qinghe, "Wotan Lijing yuan de gaibian" [On my editing of the script for *Lichees and Mirror*], in Anonymous, *Lijing yuan tedaben*, unpaginated.

inconsistent with her fellow Wuniangs on the mainland: she donned an elaborate hairdo with a red cord draped from her head. An archetypal Wuniang "look" appears to have survived the 1949 divide and eventually to have been codified in the PRC through its inclusion in the 1957 *Chen San Wuniang* film.[48]

Advertisements for the *Lijing yuan* series of films in the Philippines stressed the supposed production quality and unprecedented investment—purportedly HK$500,000—that producers had made in what was hoped would represent a new criterion in Amoy-dialect films: "You would never have thought that there could be such an outstanding Amoy-dialect film [as this]," claimed sensationalist marketing material for the first installment.[49] The *Lijing yuan* films were also shown in Singapore in the first half of 1954; they were distributed there by Kong Ngee (光藝 Guangyi), a company that managed theaters throughout colonial Malaya.[50] Promotional material for the films claimed that they were also exhibited in Thailand and Vietnam.[51]

All of this reflected not simply the geographic dispersal of Minnanyu-speaking audiences across the region but the geopolitics of film distribution in Cold War Asia. For example, Manila was indeed a city with a significant market for *liyuanxi*- and/or *nanyin*-inspired films because of the ancestral origins (i.e., Fujian) of many inhabitants of its Binondo district. Yet the Philippines was equally one of Taipei's staunchest diplomatic allies and maintained strict controls on the

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[48] Advertising for the film (e.g., in Anonymous, *Lijing yuan tedaben*) showed Jiang Fan's Wuniang adopting the same red cord and hairstyle as that specified in scripts for the PRC version of the *liyuanxi* play.

[49] The series was advertised in the *Huaqiao shangbao* (Manila) in mid-December 1953, with similarly sensationalist claims, on an almost daily basis.

[50] "Lijing yuan" [Lichees and the mirror], *Guangyi* [Kong ngee], March 1, 1954, 1; see also "Lijing yuan" [Lichees and the mirror], *Guangyi dianying huabao* [Kong ngee movie pictorial] 70 (July 1954): 16.

[51] Such claims appear in Anonymous, *Lijing yuan tedaben*.

exhibition of films originating in the Communist world, especially when it came to China.[52] Colonial Malaya was a similar case in point. In cities such as Penang, substantial numbers of theater-goers were familiar with the *liyuanxi* form (because of the significant number of people of southern Fujianese descent in that city). Up until the mid-1950s, however, they were unlikely to have seen many films produced in the PRC, due to the restrictions that the colonial administration there had imposed at the start of the Malayan Emergency—the armed insurgency against British rule, led by the Malayan Communist Party, that had started in 1948.[53] Even in Singapore, colonial censors were reluctant to allow the wholesale import of PRC-produced films until 1956—a point to which I shall return below.

While there is no evidence to suggest that these "made in Hong Kong" *Lijing yuan* films were ever shown in the PRC, it is remarkable that efforts to reform this story, produce a new script (by, in the case of Xu Shuji, a cadre who had an intimate knowledge of the Fujianese community in the Philippines), and perform the play around the PRC all occurred in the 1953–1954 period—precisely as a quite different version of the same story was being shown on theater screens in Manila, Singapore, and Taipei. It is also worth bearing in mind that Hong Kong's Amoy-dialect film industry maintained a close relationship with Voice of America throughout the 1950s. A number of the industry's major celebrities worked as Voice of America Minnanyu presenters, reporting (to an imagined PRC audience) on happenings in the southern Fujianese communities of "Free Asia."[54]

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[52] Claude Haberer, *Between Tiger and Dragon: A History of Philippine Relations with China and Taiwan* (Manila: Anvil, 2009), esp. 59–65.

[53] T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. 291–93.

[54] On this, see Chaplain Chang (Zhang Peng), "Chaplain's unchartered voyage" (unpublished

Exporting Socialist *Liyuanxi*

The decision taken by Fujianese provincial authorities to produce a color film based on the reformed *liyuanxi* version of *Chen San Wuniang* needs to be understood in the context of the *Lijing yuan* series of films, even though the Amoy-dialect films were never publicly acknowledged in the PRC. In other words, the PRC-produced film was not the only version vying for market share in Asia in the mid-1950s. We should not, however, assume that this represented a mere copy of Wang Qinghe's efforts, for the decision to produce the *liyuanxi* film also came close on the heels of the Hundred Flowers movement in 1956.[55] Shooting was originally planned to start at the Pegasus Film Studio (天马电影制片厂 Tianma dianying zhipianchang) in Shanghai in November 1956, although this was delayed (for reasons unknown) until February 1957. The movie—touted in Fujian as a local answer to *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai*—was completed and ready for distribution by May 1957.[56]

It is some indication of the importance placed on this film project that its direction was given to Yang Xiaozhong (杨小仲 1899–1969), a director with an established record of adapting drama and opera to the screen. Yang took a decidedly Yan'an-inspired approach to the film,

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autobiography), Hong Kong Film Archive. On PRC concerns about Minnanyu broadcasts by Voice of America, see "Bu ting Meiguo zhi yin" [Do not listen to Voice of America], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], November 22, 1950. Future research may go some way in exploring the relationship between Voice of America and the Amoy-dialect film industry and especially the role of this American broadcaster in transmitting music from, and news about, Amoy-dialect films into the PRC during this period.

[55] Wang Wei, “Fujian xiqu gaige yu gujin lijing qingyuan,” esp. 11–12.

[56] "Chen San Wuniang zai Hu kai pai" [Filming starts on *Chen San Wuniang* in Shanghai], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], February 27, 1957.

especially when it came to stressing the local nature of his subject matter.[57] He used the film as a showcase for southern Fujianese performance arts, adding a plethora of local forms (some of which had nothing to do with *liyuanxi*) to early scenes, for instance.[58] This same ethnographic impulse even involved fieldwork; Yang was credited as having visited the supposed hometown of Huang Wuniang (i.e., Huzhou) in an attempt to learn more about local customs.[59] He also moved the story off the *liyuanxi* stage, making full use of the infrastructure available at the Pegasus Studio to reproduce Song dynasty Chaozhou and Quanzhou in three dimensions with the aid of complex sets, crowd scenes, and painted backdrops. Chen San was even made to ride through Chaozhou on an actual horse in Yang's cinematic version of the opera.

Chen San Wuniang was not atypical. Other movies, including "documentary registrations of stage performances and movie adaptations of operas," were also being produced in this era,[60] as were those based on Chaozhou, Fuzhou, and Cantonese performance traditions, which would in due course be exported.[61] What made *Chen San Wuniang* significant, however, was that it marked a direct challenge to Hong Kong's Amoy-dialect film industry.

This is not to argue that *Chen San Wuniang* directly replicated the Hong Kong–made *Xiayupian*, however. The original PRC film, based on the reformed 1954 script, was made in Minnanyu, just as the *liyuanxi* play on which it was based had been performed in that dialect. Yet

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[57] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing this out.
[58] These details are taken from Wu Jieqiu, "Chen San Wuniang: cong wutai dao yinmu" [*Chen San Wuniang*: from stage to screen], *Xiamen ribao* [Xiamen daily], October 16, 1957.
[59] "Liyuanxi Chen San Wuniang ji paicheng caise gushipian" [*Liyuan* opera *Chen San Wuniang* is to be turned into a color feature film], *Dagongbao* (Hong Kong), October 23, 1956.
[60] Idema, *Metamorphosis*, 19.
[61] Hai Zhen, "Wutai yu yinmu zhi jian: ershi shiji wuliushi niandai Min Yue difang xiqu dianying yanjiu" [Between stage and screen: a study of Fujianese and Cantonese local opera films made in the 1950s and 1960s], *Zhongguo yishu shikong* [China arts space], no. 1 (2016): 106–11.

a parallel version, which included dialogue dubbed into Mandarin (performed in the manner of dialogue used in Beijing opera) alongside Minnanyu arias was also produced at the same time.[62] This practice of producing different linguistic versions of the same local opera film—one in a local vernacular and another including dialogue in Putonghua—had been employed in the PRC before, especially when it came to films made for export.[63]

Nonetheless, *Chen San Wuniang* was a direct challenge to *Xiayupian*, being the first PRC-produced film based on southern Fujianese opera traditions to be distributed beyond the borders of the PRC. Its overseas distribution predated its domestic release by at least 18 months; the film was not exhibited in southern Fujian itself until the start of 1959.[64]

International distribution was managed, as for many other films emanating from the PRC, by Southern Film Company (南方電影有限公司 Nanfang dianying youxian gongsi), a Hong Kong–based company with close ties to the CCP.[65] Southern began marketing the film in Hong Kong in November 1957, alongside the first full-color "sports film" produced in the PRC, *Woman Basketball Player Number Five* (女篮五号 *Nü lan wu hao*; 1957).[66] *Chen San Wuniang*'s travels abroad thus took place within a wider context of promoting both local and

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[62] Wang Wei, "Fujian xiqu gaige yu gujin lijing qingyuan."

[63] One example of the practice is the Shanghai-produced movie *Zhen jia xun'an* (False patrol), which was based on a Fuzhou opera of the same name and exhibited in both Singapore and peninsular Malaya in early 1957. Advertisements for this film held in a collection of film ephemera at the National Library of Singapore (RCLOS 791.4361095/957/Part I) clearly show this. Future studies many go further in uncovering the origins and uses of this practice, though it may well have reflected a desire to enable PRC-produced films to be marketable to both older, dialect-speaking audiences and to younger, Mandarin-speaking cinema-goers.

[64] *Dianying jieshao* [Introduction to films] (Xiamen), no. 6 (July 1959): unpaginated.

[65] See Xu, "Southern Film Corporation."

[66] Letter from Nanfang yingye gongsi to Shanghai dianying zhipian gongsi [Letter from Southern Film Company to Shanghai Film Production Company], November 13, 1957, B77-1-346-35, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

national understandings of "new China" to a range of diasporic (and other) audiences in post-Bandung Asia.[67] Following the Bandung Conference of April 1955, the PRC had turned to film exports as a means of establishing itself as a cultural leader of the nonaligned movement in the region.[68] Just as *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (1954) had enabled new China to win sympathy on the world stage some years earlier, so too might films such as *Chen San Wuniang* win diasporic support in the nonaligned world.

Chen San Wuniang was screened in mainstream theaters in Hong Kong, alongside Soviet films and other mainland Chinese films, specifically to coincide with Chinese New Year in February 1958.[69] This is significant, for the New Year marked one of the high points and most lucrative of seasons in the cinema year in Hong Kong. While box office figures are not available, such a decision does suggest that the film's debut outside the mainland was one strongly supported by the PRC authorities.[70] Just as crucially, the exhibition of the PRC's first foray into southern Fujianese opera films in the very city that was home to the Taipei-supported Amoy-dialect film industry was, if not a cultural coup, then certainly a "shot across the bow." Up until late 1958, Hong Kong remained the only place outside the PRC in which this film was exhibited.[71] In contrast, few of the Hong Kong–produced Amoy-dialect films were ever shown in

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[67] On the importance of Bandung to the wider circulation of opera films, see Xu, "Southern Film Corporation," esp. 242–43.

[68] On this point, see Tina Mai Chen, "International Film Circuits and Global Imaginaries in the People's Republic of China, 1949–57," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 2 (2009): 149–61.

[69] "Minnan xiqupian Chen San Wuniang" [Southern Fujianese opera film *Chen San Wuniang*], *Huaqiao ribao* (Hong Kong), February 20, 1958.

[70] "Xin chun jishi xing le: xiyuan paiding dianying yueju jiemu" [Spring festival is arriving: theaters organize film and Cantonese opera programs], *Dagongbao* (Hong Kong), February 17, 1958.

[71] PRC reports from the 1950s show that, prior to 1958, *Chen San Wuniang* was only ever shown in one location outside the PRC, that being Hong Kong. See *Zhongguo dianying faxing fangyang*

the colony in which they were manufactured.

In Manila—the city that had financed the *Lijing yuan* films—*Chen San Wuniang* was never shown. The political relationship between Taipei and Manila, and the existence of a Philippine government throughout this period that was highly suspicious of Chinese Communism, meant that few mainland Chinese films were exhibited there.[72] Indeed, it is noteworthy that news of the film's production, although it appeared in Singapore and Hong Kong newspapers in 1957,[73] was not so much as mentioned in Manila dailies during the same period.[74]

In contrast, in Singapore, where colonial authorities were at this very time debating the merits of allowing PRC-produced films into local theaters, *Chen San Wuniang* was imported alongside a handful of other PRC productions, including both "modern" films and those based on regional (including southern Fujianese) performance arts, in the fall of 1958.[75] It was distributed in Singapore by Kwok Seng Film Syndicate (國星影業有限公司 Guoxing yingye youxian gongsi), a company managed at this time by Ho Ah Loke (何亞祿 1901–1982), an associate of

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tongji ziliao huibian (1949–1957): di'er ce shuchu shuru yewu bufen [Statistical compilation on the distribution and exhibition of Chinese films (1949–1957): booklet 2, section on import and export business] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying faxing fangyang gongsi, 1958), 82–83.

[72] On this wider relationship in the 1950s, see Haberer, *Between Tiger and Dragon*.

[73] For instance, "Liyuanxi *Chen San Wuniang* ji paicheng caise gushipian" [*Liyuan* opera *Chen San Wuniang* is to be turned into a color feature film], *Dagongbao* (Hong Kong), October 23, 1956.

[74] My perusal of the *Fookien Times* (*Xinmin ribao*) for 1957 (making use, ironically, of hard copies of this newspaper held at the Xiamen Library) turned up not even the briefest mention of the film's production.

[75] Among this group was a film called *Minnan budaixi*, entitled in English *Puppet Show of Southern Fujian*. This film (described as "pure entertainment" by contemporary China watchers), had been made earlier in the decade but had not been allowed into Singapore due to its mainland provenance. The "pure entertainment" assessment of this film—one that would surely have been challenged by Taipei at the time—is taken from A. Doak Barnett, *Communist China: The Early Years* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), 87.

Cathay Organization's Loke Wan Tho (陆運濤 1916–1964).[76] Like a number of other film distributors based in Singapore in 1957, Ho was at that time fostering a close relationship with Southern Films,[77] and also imported numerous PRC-produced films based on Cantonese and Beijing opera into colonial Southeast Asia in the same year.[78]

Ironically, however—given one of the original impetuses for reviving the story in Fujian during the early 1950s—the import of *Chen San Wuniang* into Singapore was permitted by censors on the basis of the *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai* precedent. *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai* had been banned from Singapore initially (due to the film's Communist provenance) but was allowed to be shown in the colony in April 1956 as a "test case."[79] *Chen San Wuniang* was presented to colonial censors in the city in September 1958 and was exhibited at Singapore's Odeon Theatre (one of the largest in the city), and at various other cinemas, in December of the same year, its PRC provenance proudly on display in press reports that accompanied it.[80]

All indications are that *Chen San Wuniang* was a commercial success in Singapore, for it was shown at several cinemas there through January 1959. The story of the film's exhibition in Singapore, however, also gives a unique insight into how it was marketed, and what exhibitors in the city believed "worked" when selling southern Fujianese films from the PRC to the diaspora.

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[76] "Kwok Seng Film Syndicate," ROB 216/31194, National Archives of Singapore.

[77]"Chinese Secretariat Fortnightly Report for the Period Ending 31 July 1957," FCO 141/15148, The National Archives (London).

[78]A number of these are listed in an advertisement for Kwok Seng in *Zhongguo shangpin zhanlanguan tekan* [Program for exhibition center of Chinese products] (Kuala Lumpur: Zhongguo shangpin zhanlanguan chouweihui, 1957), 6.

[79]"Council of Ministers, Memorandum form the Chief Secretary: The Film Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying Tai," May 14, 1956, FCO 141/15152, The National Archives (London); see also Xu, "Southern Film Corporation."

[80] "Chen San Wuniang Oudi'an jinwan banye chang" [*Chen San Wuniang* to show at the Odeon at midnight tonight], *Nanyang siangpau* (Singapore), December 28, 1958.

When first exhibited in late December 1958, *Chen San Wuniang* was shown in the way it had originally been produced, i.e., in its Minnanyu version based on the 1954 reformed *liyuanxi*. After a hiatus of just a few days, however— suggesting an attempt to rapidly respond to the perceived needs of different audiences in the city—*Chen San Wuniang* became two films in Singapore. At some theaters, the Mandarin-Minnanyu hybrid version was shown; at others, it was advertised as being exhibited in its original, southern Fujianese form.[81]

It is also in Singapore that we find the most detailed critical reactions to the film penned outside of China. All of these suggest that the film received a mixed critical reception in the city. Writing in the *Nanfang wanbao* (南方晚報), Li Xingke (李星可) (1914-1996) praised the film's production quality, noting that, in terms of everything from props to editing, this "modernized *liyuanxi*" (摩登化梨园戏 *modenghua liyuanxi*) film surpassed other "Chinese opera and dance films" (中國戲舞台記錄片 *Zhongguo xi wutai jilupian*) that had been exhibited in the city before. He also, however, expressed concerns about the fact that in being "modernized" the film had made *liyuanxi* look very much like other forms of local opera emanating from the PRC. Elements of reform that we now know had been introduced by Xu Shuji's team were singled out for mention. The clothing and accoutrements of Wuniang, for example, were reminiscent of the so-called "ancient" (古裝 *guzhuang*) style of costume promoted by Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳) (1894-1961) rather than of traditional Fujianese opera, argued Li.[82]

A review by Jian Ke (劍客) in the *Nanyang siangpau* (南洋商報 *Nanyang shangbao*)

[81] These details are taken from daily advertisements for the film that appeared in Singapore's *Nanyang siangpau* over the period in question.
[82] Li Xingke, "Kan Chen San Wuniang shiyang" [Watching a preview of *Chen San Wuniang*], *Nanfang wanbao*, January 5, 1959, 6.

similarly questioned some of the reformed elements of the film, while acknowledging its production quality; the reviewer even suggested that, on this second point, it might prompt a higher quality of southern Fujianese opera performances in Singapore. For this reviewer, however, the film's politicized and moralizing tone was so obvious as to make it monotonous (千篇一律 *qianpian yilü*): the film deteriorated into dogmatism (教條主義 *jiaotiao zhuyi*) in the critic's perception.[83]

Chen San Wuniang's release was known of in Taiwan, and it was also ridiculed in the Taiwan press as evidence of the "covetous" nature of "the Communist bandits and their fellow travelers," who were presented as wanting to take advantage of the commercial success of the Hong Kong–produced Amoy-dialect films. As a moral and at times financial supporter of the Amoy-dialect film industry, the Nationalist government had an interest in dismissing *Chen San Wuniang* as a Communist attempt to challenge the monopoly on southern Fujianese cultural production beyond China itself. It mocked what it believed to be a challenge destined to fail because the "two big markets" for Minnanyu films were "Taiwan and the Philippines, both of them anti-Communist strongholds."[84]

This may also explain why Taiwanese theatrical troupes were dispatched to the Philippines during Chinese New Year in 1957 (i.e., just as the film was being made on the mainland) to perform *Chen San Wuniang* to audiences in Manila.[85] It also explains ongoing anger in Taipei

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[83] Jian Ke, op cit.

[84] "Taiyupian de qiantu" [Future of Taiwanese Hokkien films], *Lianhebao* (Taipei), May 20, 1957.

[85] A group called the Taiwan lianhe jutuan (Taiwan United Theatrical Troupe) performed *Chen San Wuniang* (perhaps in *gezaixi*, or Taiwanese opera, form) in Manila, to celebrate Chinese New Year in 1957. Advertisements for this appear in *Xinmin ribao* [Fookien times] (Manila), January 31, 1957. While it was common for Taiwanese troupes to perform in Manila, it seems a

into the late 1950s about Singapore's willingness to allow mainland Chinese "folk arts" and films—as *Chen San Wuniang* indeed was—into that colony.[86]

Nonetheless, *Chen San Wuniang*'s international release did have an impact on the Amoy-dialect film industry, for attempts were made to reclaim ownership of the *Chen San Wuniang* story. The most striking evidence for this can be found in the fact that both Jiang Fan and Wang Qinghe appeared in a 1959 remake of *Lijing yuan*, a now largely forgotten film entitled *Yichun liusan* (益春留傘 Yichun leaves an umbrella), produced by the Singapore-based company Eng Wah (榮華 Rong Hua), which had previously exhibited multiple Amoy-dialect films in its theaters. As this film found its way onto screens in Malaya (and while *Chen San Wuniang* languished on the desks of Malayan censors), advertisers made the brazen claim that "their" story had "caused a sensation all over Fujian province" (哄動福建全省 *hongdong Fujian quansheng*). This suggested full knowledge on the part of Malayan film distributors of the existence of the PRC-made *Chen San Wuniang* film.[87]

Similarly, it can hardly be a coincidence that commercial Amoy-dialect film producers began to consider the production of color Minnanyu films only *after* news of *Chen San Wuniang* spread in 1957. No Amoy-dialect film had been made in color prior to this—a fact that reflected financial rather than political concerns on the part of the businesspeople in Manila who first

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remarkable coincidence that a performance of this very opera should have occurred just prior to the completion of the filming of *Chen San Wuniang* in Shanghai.

[86] Yu Tian, "Cong Feifang yingren fu Xingjiapo shuoqi" [On the visit to Singapore of Communist celebrities], *Yingju zhoubao* [Film and drama weekly] (Taipei), 72 (December 1959): 5.

[87] Such advertisements appear in, for instance, *Guanghua ribao* (Kwong wah yit poh) (Penang), April 3, 1959.

funded the industry.[88] The Chinese-language Philippine daily *The Fookien Times*, for example, disingenuously reported in February 1957 that a Hong Kong–produced Amoy-dialect film entitled *Tianxian songzi* (天仙送子 Heaven-sent son) would be "the first ever Amoy-dialect film to be made in color,"[89] while similar claims were made in the Chinese-language press in Malaya about a *nanyin* film entitled *Xiuruji* (繡襦記 Embroidered coat) in 1958.[90] It cannot be a coincidence that the former was exhibited in Singapore just as *Chen San Wuniang*'s run was coming to an end in January 1959.[91] It had taken this well-funded challenge from the Chinese mainland to prompt commercial Amoy-dialect filmmakers in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia to start investing in color films and to return to the *Chen San Wuniang* story, although they never had to compete directly with the film *Chen San Wuniang*.

Provincial and Diasporic Readings of the Chinese Cold War

For all the fanfare surrounding production of *Chen San Wuniang* in Fujian in 1957, this PRC attempt to export a socialist interpretation of a southern Fujianese opera film abroad was ultimately stymied, and for the remainder of the 1950s and 1960s Fujianese filmmaking in all its forms remained a bastion of anti-Communist cultural production, both in Nationalist Taiwan and in Guomindang-affiliated Hong Kong filmmaking circles.[92]

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[88] Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 23.
[89] "Diyu bu caise Xiayupian" [The first color Amoy-dialect film], *Xinmin ribao* [Fookien times], May 27, 1957.
[90] Claims about this being the first full-color film in Minnanyu appear, for example, in *Zhongguo bao* [China news], December 6, 1958.
[91] Advertisements for *Xiuruji* appeared in *Nanyang siangpau*, January 13, 1959.
[92] Ironically, *Chen San Wuniang* has outlived *Lijing yuan* and most of the other Hong Kong–produced nanyin films. No copies of *Lijing yuan* have survived, while *Chen San Wuniang*

The central point, however, is that the fate of this film based on a PRC-reformed regional opera had little to do with the content of the film. Instead, it reflected the monopoly on film distribution that groups affiliated with the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek maintained in many parts of the region, especially those areas that also happened to be home to significant Minnanyu-speaking populations, such as the Philippines and Malaya. Given that the PRC was certainly aware of such restrictions, the decision to produce a Mandarin-Minnanyu version of *Chen San Wuniang* may even have represented an attempt to break out of dialect-specific confines and produce a film based on a distinctively southern Fujianese tradition that would appeal beyond Manila, Penang, or Singapore. Such a decision certainly seems to have worked in Singapore, but we simply do not know if this socialist rewriting of *Chen San Wuniang* would have appealed to audiences beyond that city—those who had queued up to watch *Lijing yuan* in 1954—because the politics of film distribution meant it was never given the opportunity. It is significant, for example, that despite complaints about some of the reformed elements of the film (such as its supposed dogmatism), critics in Singapore recognized the superior production quality of *Chen San Wuniang*—a compliment rarely extended to Amoy-dialect films.[93]

The national and international impact of *Chen San Wuniang* cannot compare with that of cognate opera films such as *Tianxian pei* of Idema's study or, indeed, with the film that at least partly inspired *Chen San Wuniang*'s production, *Liang Shanbo Zhu Yingtai*. It never became a household name throughout China, and its arias were not memorized by millions across Asia. Nor was *Chen San Wuniang* the catalyst for a regionwide commercial interest in the form upon

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remains commercially available in DVD format and on the internet.

[93] On the frequent criticism of shoddiness leveled at the Amoy-dialect film industry, see Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, esp. 23–24.

which it was based, as *Tianxian pei* was for Huangmei opera.[94]

None of this should suggest, however, that this film was insignificant. As a pilot project, *Chen San Wuniang*'s very production suggested that at an indirect dialogue was developing between southern Fujian theater practitioners and the Hong Kong–based Amoy-dialect film industry in the mid-1950s, one perhaps filtered through radio broadcasting, the pages of the regional Chinese-language press, and word-of-mouth accounts that travelled among the vast southern Fujianese diaspora. This dialogue played itself out in a competition for control of one particular story and the right to interpret and perform that story in a Cold War context. Indeed, given that the resurgence of this same story gave rise to films based on it in other languages and dialects,[95] as well as to new interpretations of the *liyuanxi* play upon which the 1957 film was based in places where the film was never even exhibited,[96] we might view this as a complex, polyphonic dialogue that included many other groups and individuals across the region, rather than simply a binary struggle between Free China and People's China.

What the case of *Chen San Wuniang* also suggests is that we need to consider how imagined "Fujians" (or, for that matter, imagined Chaozhous or Guangzhous)—and not simply rival visions of China—were being continually created, re-created, and circulated throughout East and Southeast Asia during the 1950s. If we are to take seriously Tony Day's suggestion that the Cold

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[94] Idema, *Metamorphosis*, 21.

[95] A film based on a Cantonese opera version of the story and entitled *Lizhi ji* [Lichee's tale] was produced in Hong Kong in 1957. *Lizhi ji* [Lichee's tale], PR1770X, Hong Kong Film Archive. A number of Chaozhou opera films were also made based on this story (in the PRC and in Hong Kong) in the 1950s and 1960s.

[96] Although PRC records suggest the film was not exhibited in Indonesia, for example, local *liyuanxi* troupes in Jakarta performed the play, overtly claiming inspiration for doing so from the reform of the opera in the PRC. See "Fujian liyuanxi Chen San Wuniang" [Fujianese *liyuanxi Chen San Wuniang*], *Nanyang* (Jakarta) 112 (February 1957): unpaginated.

War in Asia was "driven by regional historical imperatives as much as by global forces,"[97] then we also need to consider how provincial-level discussions about cultural heritage played a crucial role in this same conflict. Competition over ownership of the *Chen San Wuniang* story and its transformation into a range of competing films—including one based on a socialist, reformed *liyuanxi* and another that was a commercial endeavor incorporating *nanyin*—are thus not simply part of a cross-Strait battle for "hearts and minds." Rather, this case is a story about discussions within provincial communities themselves about the value of folk traditions in the pursuit of national aims, the value of local identities as opposed to centralized and national-level control of cultural expression, and the ability of cultural practitioners, writers, filmmakers, and musicians to maintain a dialogue with one another across political and national boundaries in spite of (and sometimes because of) the geopolitical context in which they found themselves during the Cold War.

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[97] Tony Day, "Cultures at War in Cold War Southeast Asia: An Introduction," in Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem, eds., *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2010), 2.

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