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From Transnationalism to Nativism: The Rise, Decline and Reinvention of a Regional Hokkien Entertainment Industry

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INTRODUCTION

One consequence of the much documented rise of nativist nationalism in Taiwan over the last decade or more has been the extent to which certain cultural traits which are not unique to Taiwan have been co-opted into a discourse of ‘Taiwaneseeness’. One example of this is Hokkien—a dialect spoken not only in Taiwan, but also throughout Southeast Asia and in parts of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In Taiwan, Hokkien has emerged as arguably the most important symbol of the pro-independence movement, and is known simply as *Taiyu*—‘Taiwan’s language’. It is to this dialect that Taiwanese politicians turn when they seek to present their credentials as ‘true believers’ in the island’s independence. And it is to the films made in this dialect by the ‘New Cinema’ directors that many scholars turn when trying to make sense of ‘local’ Taiwanese identity.

Yet there has been surprisingly little effort to either deconstruct the process by which Hokkien has been ‘localised’ in Taiwan, or to examine the irony of the fact that this most Taiwanese of linguistic symbols has had a very *non*-local history. The long-standing trade in Hokkien cultural products across national borders, for instance, appears to have largely escaped the attention of the academy. Instead, we find numerous literatures which, at some points, overlap, but which tend to take a parochial focus on the dialect, and the people who speak it, in respective societies. In Southeast Asia, for example, we find a historiography of a dialect group—when the ‘Hokkiens’ arrived, what trades they undertook and what organisations they founded.¹ In studies of the People’s Republic of China, we find a focus on the revival of a province (i.e. Fujian) after decades of stagnation,² as well as a regional

¹ See, for instance, Thomas T. W. Tan (ed), *Chinese Dialect Groups: Traits and Trades* (Singapore: Opinion Books, 1990).

² An example being Y..M. Yeung and David K.Y. Chu (eds.), *Fujian: A Coastal Province in Transition and Transformation* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000).

folklore that originates in that province.³ In studies of Taiwan, we invariably find a literature concerning a language.

Moreover, in the study of cultural expression in Hokkien throughout all these different societies, there is a general academic tendency to concentrate on either ‘traditional’ art forms (usually meaning those which find their origins in the pre-modern era) or, in keeping with a Frankfurt-School-inspired disdain for commercialisation, only those art forms which are commercially unsuccessful within Hokkien-speaking societies themselves (such as the films of Taiwan’s New Cinema directors). This has resulted in a dearth of English-language scholarship on commercial Hokkien popular songs, television programmes and advertisements, or in the relegation of such products to the footnotes of studies concerning political developments within Hokkien-speaking societies.⁴

Yet, as I hope to show in this paper, it is precisely in the commercial entertainment industry that we can trace the rise, decline and renaissance of Hokkien cultural expression in Asia over the last half century. And it is the very international nature of this entertainment industry that enables us to look at the ways in which Hokkien has moved across national borders, rather than simply within a *Taiwanese* television industry, a *Chinese* film industry or a *Malaysian* music industry.

In this paper, therefore, my aim is twofold. On the one hand, I am asking why and how Hokkien as a medium of song, film and television has, internationally, now largely become the preserve of Taiwanese nationalism. On the other hand, I am asking whether or not we can speak of a transnational, ‘pan-Hokkien’ cultural industry, in the same way that some scholars have defined and studied a ‘pan-Cantonese’ cultural industry.⁵ Further, how might an attempt to sketch a brief history of a such an industry prompt us to rethink not only the very political nature of the use of Hokkien in Taiwan, Southeast Asia and the PRC today, but also the wider cultural relationship between these different societies?

³ Xue Xiaowang, *Mazu de zimin: Min Tai haiyang wenhua yanjiu* [The children of Mazu: A study of the maritime culture of Taiwan and Fujian] (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1999); He Jinshan (ed.), *Min Tai quyu wenhua* [The regional culture of Taiwan and Fujian] (Xiamen: Xiamen Daxue Chubanshe, 2006).

⁴ There are, of course, exceptions; some of these shall be raised later in this paper.

⁵ Indeed, I borrow the phrase from Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: the politics of Chinese cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 56.

HOKKIEN, TAIWANESE AND AMOY DIALECT

At the outset, it is perhaps necessary to define what is meant by the term Hokkien. In much of English-speaking Southeast Asia, the term ‘Hokkien’ (despite literally meaning ‘Fujian’ in the dialect that bears its name) refers specifically to a variety of the *Min* dialect group, *Min* being one of the major dialect groups into which linguists have split the languages of China.⁶

Reflecting the fact that this dialect has a very different significance in different contexts—differences reflected in some of the ways I looked at above—Hokkien is known by different names in others parts of the world. Most noticeably, in Taiwan, where Hokkien is spoken by over 70% of a population of over 23 million, the dialect is almost universally referred to as ‘*Taiyu*’ (literally ‘Taiwanese’). Whilst the appropriation of the dialect into a discourse of ‘Taiwaneseness’ throughout the course of the 20th century is of relevance to some of the issues I shall be examining below, it will suffice at this stage to note that, despite some differences in vocabulary and accent, *Taiyu* is essentially Hokkien by another name.

Similarly, in the PRC, the term *Minnanyu* (literally ‘Southern *Min*’) is used, while historically, the term *Xiayu* or *Xiamenyu*—literally, ‘the language of Xiamen’, but most often rendered in English as ‘Amoy dialect’⁷—has also been employed at different periods.⁸

Whilst there are variations of Hokkien in different parts of the world, and despite the fact that many of these variations have themselves been identified and named by scholars (e.g., ‘Taiwanese Hokkien’⁹ and ‘Standard Malaysian Hokkien’,¹⁰ for instance), speakers of this

⁶ That the term for the entire province is now almost universally used to refer to the dialect spoken in and by people originating in a very specific strip of coastal southern Fujian (around the administrative districts of Xiamen, Zhangzhou and Quanzhou), is probably due to the fact that almost 80% of people of Fujianese ancestry who emigrated to Southeast Asia hailed from that area. See Lynn Pan (ed), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 33.

⁷ ‘Amoy’ was the name used in English sources throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries for what is now the city of Xiamen. It was but one in an entire system of Chinese toponyms used by foreigners in China throughout much of the pre-1949 era, known as the Postal System (other examples being ‘Swatow’ for the city now known as Shantou, and ‘Canton’ for Guangzhou). This Postal System is now considered archaic, however. In this paper, I shall therefore refer to the city of Xiamen by its current name, while translating the term *Xiayu* as ‘Amoy-dialect’ in keeping with much of the extant literature.

⁸ And is still used by scholars today. See, for instance, Chen Ronglan and Li Xitai, *Xiamen Fangyan* [The Amoy Dialect] (Xiamen: Lujiang Chubanshe, 1999).

⁹ As in Ho Ching-hsien, *Speak Taiwanese Hokkien* (Taipei: Taipei Language Institute, 1991).

dialect in Taiwan, the PRC, Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere are able to communicate with one another and understand recordings made in Hokkien; *Taiyu*, *Minnanyu*, *Xiayu* and Hokkien are ostensibly the same dialect.

More importantly, in Taiwan, the only society in which there remains an industry of any note dedicated to the production of songs, television programmes and, to a much lesser degree, films in Hokkien, the popular culture which has developed around this dialect is not merely distinguished from entertainment in other dialects and languages linguistically. Rather, *Taiyu* has taken on a significance that goes beyond language, such that *Taiyu* films, songs and television programmes are now differentiated from songs in other dialects by the style in which they are sung, the people who perform them, the market they enjoy and the entire culture that surrounds them. Hokkien (i.e., as *Taiyu*) has become equated with an entire aesthetic and style of cultural expression.

In much of the literature concerning contemporary Hokkien popular culture in Taiwan the origins of this link between the dialect and a particular style or aesthetic are never questioned. It is almost universally accepted that, as Hokkien is the language of ‘the people’ (as opposed to Mandarin, the ‘language of the state’), the products made in the dialect reflect a style that is modest and less glamorous. Whilst the glamour of the mainstream Mandarin music scene in Taiwan and its Hong Kong on-screen contemporaries is often described as false or forced, it is just as equally assumed that Hokkien singers reflect a genuine sincerity. On album covers and television screens, Hokkien-speaking celebrities are invariably portrayed as anything but glamorous, as the children of difficult upbringings in urban ‘underworld’ or rural settings. While the *international* stars of Hong Kong cinema and Mandarin pop advertise luxury items, the *local* stars of Hokkien song and drama advertise karaoke machines and alcohol.

But why is this the case? Has this dialect always been associated with a particular lifestyle and culture? In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to look back to what might be identified as the ‘golden age’ of both Hokkien popular music and film in Asia—the mid-1950s through to the mid-1960s—a period which, as we shall see below, set many of the standards that continue to define Hokkien popular cultural production today.

¹⁰ Tan Chee-Beng, ‘Socio-cultural diversities and identities’, in Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng (eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 46.

THE POST-WAR HOKKIEN WORLD

The recording of Hokkien opera and songs in Taiwan and China can be traced back to the 1920s. There also existed, during the middle stage of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, an industry of recorded Hokkien popular music. This was funded mainly by American record companies such as Columbia and RCA. Although significant, this industry was largely destroyed by the start of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, and the subsequent restrictions on cultural production in Chinese dialects introduced by the Japanese.¹¹ In terms of scale of production and sheer market size, however, developments in the 1920s and 1930s pale in comparison to the international Hokkien popular culture industry that emerged within a decade of the end of the Second World War.

The birth of this post-war Hokkien culture industry was the result of a series of political developments in East and Southeast Asia in the immediate post-war years. For Taiwan, incorporation into the Chinese Republic in 1945 saw the return to the island of a Japanese-educated cultural elite—the children of middle-class, Hokkien-speaking Taiwanese who had made the most of Japanese colonialism by pursuing studies in metropolitan Japan during the 1930s. This period also saw the arrival of Nationalist Chinese government institutions which would provide the hardware (i.e. the physical studios and recording facilities) for this industry. Ties across the Taiwan Strait, specifically between Taiwan and Fujian province, were also strengthened in the 1945–49 period, and this had a profound impact on Hokkien cultural production in both Taiwan and Fujian, as it meant increased interaction between Hokkien opera troupes, theatres groups, writers and intellectuals.¹²

Elsewhere, this early post-war period bore witness to the foundation of entirely new Hokkien-speaking communities in places such as Hong Kong. The closure of China's borders following the founding of the PRC in 1949, coupled with suspicions about large-scale Chinese immigration in countries such as the Philippines, saw a substantial number of Fujianese stranded in Hong Kong while en route to or from Southeast Asia in the early 1950s,

¹¹ The history of the production of Hokkien popular music in Taiwan during the 1930s is most thoroughly documented in Zhuang Yongming, *Taiwan geyao zhuixiangqu* [Taiwanese ballads and nostalgic songs] (Taipei: Qianwei Chubanshe, 1994), esp. pp. 22-23.

¹² This led to a renewed interest in performance arts such as *gezaixi*. Chen Geng, *Haixia beige: fengyu cangsang gezaixi* [Tragedy in the Strait: the long and difficult story of Hokkien opera] (Fuzhou: Haichao Sheying Chubanshe, 2005), pp. 140-149.

for instance. It was from this community—Hong Kong’s ‘Little Fujian’¹³—that a future Hokkien entertainment industry would come to be peopled.

Moreover, the fall of the Chinese mainland to communism in 1949 saw the displacement of entire media industries, particularly from Shanghai. This would indirectly shape the Hokkien entertainment industry in the years following. For instance, in Singapore and Malaya, the loss of Shanghai resulted in a shortage of recorded Chinese music, and the need for local business interests who had previously distributed Shanghai-produced music and films to look elsewhere for product.¹⁴ Moreover, a number of scholars have also identified the foundation of the People’s Republic as the catalyst for what has been described as a ‘diasporic Chinese film market’—one which, until the 1960s, involved Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochew film industries co-existing with one another.¹⁵

In urban Southeast Asia, the end of Japanese occupation also allowed for greater cultural interaction with China and amongst Chinese communities around the region, while the rubber boom of the early 1950s led to greater spending power amongst sections of the middle class. The results were seen in the amusement parks of Singapore and Malaya, where live performance in the form of *getai*—modern, Shanghai-inspired stage shows—was reaching a peak by the early 1950s.¹⁶ As we shall see below, it was from *getai* that many of the celebrities of Hokkien entertainment would emerge, and it was amongst the amusement-park-going Hokkien crowds of Southeast Asia that such an industry would find a market.

¹³ The most thorough study of this community’s origins and fate is Gregory Elliott Guldin, “‘Overseas’ at home: the Fujianese of Hong Kong”, PhD Thesis, Department of Cultural Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977. See also Siumi Maria Tam, ‘Engendering Minnan Mobility: Women Sojourners in a Patriarchal World’, in Tan Chee-Beng (ed), *Southern Fujian: Reproduction of Traditions in Post-Mao China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006), pp. 145-162.

¹⁴ A point noted explicitly, for instance, in Singapore’s Department of Broadcasting, *Report of the Department of Broadcasting for the years 1946-52* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1953), p. 12.

¹⁵ Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 31.

¹⁶ Yung Sai Shing and Chan Kwok Bun, ‘Leisure, pleasure and consumption: Ways of entertaining oneself’, in Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong (eds), *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2003), p. 164.

AMOY-DIALECT FILMS

These social, political and economic developments in different parts of East and Southeast Asia provided the context within which the first truly transnational Hokkien-based popular culture industry was to come into existence. This was represented in the so-called Amoy-dialect films, or *Xiyupian*—films made in Hong Kong but in Hokkien. At one level, this industry was the creation of Southeast Asian Chinese capital which saw a market for Hokkien-speaking audiences in the ‘*Nanyang*’ and in Taiwan in the immediate post-war years. Yet the industry was only possible thanks to the existence of cheap Hokkien labour in Hong Kong’s ‘Little Fujian’¹⁷ and an excess of performers from different parts of the Chinese world, not all of them Hokkien.

Funding for the production of Amoy-dialect films came from Philippine-based companies such as Xinguang, as well as, later, from Singapore-based companies such as Kong Ngee and Eng Wah. Yet it was also driven by smaller companies, such as Minsheng and Hua Xia,¹⁸ which had been set up by Hokkien-speaking sojourners from China living in Hong Kong. By the mid-1950s, these and other companies were together producing dozens of Amoy-dialect films each year. By the end of the decade, the industry had become so lucrative that even the Shaw Brothers had become involved in making a handful of films in Hokkien.¹⁹

Receiving no government backing, Amoy-dialect films were completely market-driven. This meant that companies sought not only to produce films that would appeal to the largest possible market of Hokkien speakers, but also meant that they sought the lowest possible production costs. This is perhaps one of the reasons for the initial trend towards the production of ‘opera films’—something which was witnessed in both Hong Kong and, a few years later, in Taiwan—which essentially involved the filming of Hokkien opera

¹⁷ As the Singapore film financier and distributor Goh Eng Wah has noted, the fact that many members of this itinerant Fujianese population in Hong were looking for work meant that Amoy-dialect films were essentially cheap to produce. There was always a steady stream of people willing to write songs, act as extras and play music for soundtracks. ‘Interview with Goh Eng Wah’, 7 July 1997, Oral History Collection 1907 (Reel 9), National Archives of Singapore.

¹⁸ The names of some of these smaller studios displayed a very clear dedication to the production of films specifically for Hokkien reception: Minsheng literally meant ‘the sound of Fujian’; Hua Xia ‘Chinese Xiamen’.

¹⁹ Raphaël Millet, *Singapore Cinema* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), pp. 56-60.

performances.²⁰ This saw a number of traditions associated with Hokkien opera, not least that of the *khau-tiau-a*²¹—sad, ‘tear jerking’ melodies and plots—becoming central features of commercial Hokkien production.

But the early dominance of these opera films also reflected the ‘deterritorialised’ nature of the industry. Being based on a traditional performing art, and on plots drawn from the Chinese classics and Fujian folklore, Amoy-dialect opera films were accessible to Hokkien speakers throughout Asia. The fact that such films largely avoided reference to contemporary political or social issues also meant that government interference (in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia) remained minimal in the early years of this genre,²² and may explain why at least some Hong Kong-produced Amoy-dialect opera films were exhibited in post-1949 Fujian.²³

By the late 1950s, however, a whole range of sub-genres of Amoy-dialect films were being produced, from costume dramas to urban melodramas and comedies. Many of these began to reflect the realities of life in different parts of the Hokkien diaspora, and marked a distinct move away from on-screen reproductions of operas or Chinese myths. The financial challenge of post-war life in Hong Kong’s ‘Little Fujian’ and working-class Malaya; the cultural differences between modern urban centres such as Hong Kong, Taipei or Singapore and rural village life in Fujian; and the changes that were being wrought by political and economic developments throughout the region—these were all themes that began to be explored in some depth by the late 1950s. Like Cantonese and Mandarin films of the day, Amoy-dialect films also began to appeal to a distinctly middle-class audience, depicting a Hokkien-speaking world of white-collar workers, nightclub hostesses and ‘modern’ couples who shuttled back and forth between Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila and Taipei.

²⁰ The point concerning the low production costs of Hokkien opera films produced in Taiwan is made in Ju-Fang Shih, ‘Gezaixi dianying suoyou chansheng de shehui lishi’ [Social history derived from Taiwanese opera films], *Xinwenxue yanjiu* [Mass communication research] 59 (1999.4): 23-40. It is significant that both Amoy-dialect films, and *Taiyu* films (which shall be examined below), began with filmed operas.

²¹ On the tradition of the *khau-tiau-a*, see Chen Geng, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-101.

²² Ye Longyan, *Chunhua Menglu: Zhengzong Taiyu Dianyingxing Xingshuai lu* [Dreams of the spring dew: The rise and fall of genuine Taiwanese films] (Luzhou: Boyang Wenhua, 1999), p. 59.

²³ One Taiwanese author notes how the 1957 Kong Ngee-produced Amoy film *Taohua qixue ji* [Peach Blossoms Weep Blood] was exhibited in post-Liberation Xiamen. *Dajia lai chang Taiwan ge* [Let’s all sing Taiwanese songs] (Taipei County: Taibeixian Wenhua Zhongxin, 1993), pp. 5-6. The question of PRC state policy and local Fujian consumption of Hokkien films and songs produced in Hong Kong (and indeed in Taiwan) in the 1950s is a fascinating issue that future studies might go further in addressing.

Today, the Amoy-dialect films are mentioned only in passing in studies of the ‘national cinemas’ of Singapore or Taiwan, or else as a footnote to the development of the Hong Kong film industry.²⁴ But as the first major wave of commercialised, mass entertainment produced in Hokkien, the Amoy-dialect films and the songs they brought with them—the so-called ‘*mo deng Fujian gequ*’ [‘modern Hokkien songs’] which sustained a market in their own right throughout Southeast Asia²⁵—were significant in setting a number of standards.

The first of these was a reputation for shoddiness. The continual search for low production costs, coupled with what seemed to be a willingness on the part of many Hokkien audiences to accept a generally inferior standard of production, resulted in poor quality films. Amoy-dialect films cost less to produce than Mandarin or Cantonese films in terms of both money and time.²⁶

Moreover, as a reflection of the fact that many of the stars of the Amoy-dialect world had started their careers on the stages of amusement parks or opera sets, these films maintained a close connection to music and live performance. For example, the tradition of *suipian dengtai* (lit. ‘going on stage following films’)—in which actors would tour to Taiwan, Malaya and the Philippines and perform songs from particular films live on stage—was apparently unique to Hokkien.²⁷

Amoy-dialect films also lacked much of the glamour associated with Mandarin-based entertainment that had developed in Shanghai in the pre-war years. The ‘stars’ of Amoy-dialect cinema were almost always depicted as having led difficult lives or hailing from humble origins. The life story of Sio Kwan (aka Ivy Ling Po)—probably the most successful star of *Xiayupian* in the 1950s—as dramatised in a 1964 film made in Taiwan, showed her journey from a working-class childhood in Republican-era Xiamen, abandonment by her

²⁴ As in Stephen Teo, ‘Local and Global Identity: Whither Hong Kong Cinema?’, *senses of cinema* 7 (2000.6), www.sensesofcinema.com.

²⁵ *Modeng Fujian geji* [A collection of modern Hokkien songs] (Singapore: Youlian, 1954). Mass-produced booklets such as this contained lyrics and scores from songs featured in Amoy-dialect films.

²⁶ Amoy-dialect actor Kwan Sin Ngee, for instance, claims to have acted in ten movies in only a seven-month period in Hong Kong in the late 1950s. ‘Interview with Ong Joo Hong (aka Kwan Sin Ngee)’, 18 August 1992, Oral History Collection 1369/14 (Reel 2), National Archives of Singapore.

²⁷ ‘Xiayupian huanghou Zhuang Xuefang’ [Chuang Hsueh-fang: Queen of Amoy-dialect film], *Yinhe Huabao* [Milky Way Pictorial] (27 (1960.5): 24-25.

mother in Shantou, and relocation to a shanty town in post-1949 Hong Kong before finding fame.²⁸ The public persona of one of Sio Kwan's contemporaries, Chuang Hsueh-fang, was similarly linked to a poverty-stricken childhood.²⁹ Such stories were often reflected in the very characters that were played on screen—the struggling songstress or actress of rural upbringing being a common character for both the above-mentioned artistes.

The Amoy-dialect films also set a precedent in terms of a lack of originality, or rather, a tendency to borrow story lines, songs, studios, and indeed entire films, from the Cantonese or Mandarin canons. The actor Wong Ching-ho, for instance, notes that many of the *Xiayupian* in which he acted were essentially carbon copies of Cantonese productions, with some studios shooting Cantonese and Amoy films concurrently, each scene being shot in a different dialect.³⁰ In other instances, Hokkien films would be based on successful Mandarin films.³¹

Linked to this constant borrowing from Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas was a tendency on the parts of Amoy-dialect actors, directors and producers to move back and forth between parallel dialect worlds. It was completely acceptable, perhaps even desirable, for people to maintain careers that went beyond the world of Amoy-dialect films. At the same time, performers who in many cases were little more than conversant in Hokkien could often find a place in Amoy-dialect films. The Singapore-based performer Shangguan Liu Yun, who acted in a number of Eng Wah-produced *Xiayupian*, came from a Cantonese-speaking background,³² while the Taiwan-based actress Bai Yi, who starred in a number of Hong Kong-produced Amoy-dialect films, was Shanghainese. This set something of a tradition in Hokkien cultural production in which no such thing as loyalty to the dialect ever existed, and in which the boundaries between Hokkien and the world of Mandarin and Cantonese

²⁸ This was dramatised in the film *Günü Ling Bo* [The Orphan Ivy Ling] (Taipei: Tailian, 1964) but was also repeated in the entertainment press in Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

²⁹ Like Ivy Ling Bo, Chuang's life story is also linked to the loss of a parent and limited opportunities for education due to financial difficulty. See, for instance, Liu Guowei, *Lao ge qing wei liao: liuxing gequ liushi nian* [The emotions in old songs never disappear: Sixty years of popular song] (Taipei: Huafeng Wenhua, 1997), pp. 163.

³⁰ Wong Ching-ho, 'A unique genre of Hong Kong cinema: the rise and decline of Amoy films', trans. Teri Chan, *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter* 23 (2003.2).

³¹ One of the clearest copies being the 1958 Amoy-dialect film *Manbo Guniang* [Mambo Lady], produced by Yicheng; the film was almost a direct copy of the Mandarin classic *Manbo Nülang* [Mambo Girl] produced by the Cathay Organisation a year earlier.

³² Shangguan Liu yun (with Lin Fanping), *Wuye Xiangwen* [Kisses at Midnight] (Singapore: Lingzi Dazhong Chuanbo Zhongxin, 1996), pp. 64 and 108-110.

entertainment were always porous. As Sio Kwan herself once said (shortly before embarking on a Mandarin film career): ‘Mandarin, Cantonese and Amoy-dialect films—I’d like to make all of these....Dialect is insignificant’.³³

HOKKIEN POPULAR CULTURE IN TAIWAN

Whilst the Amoy-dialect films of Hong Kong represented the first major form of mass-produced, commercial Hokkien entertainment, they also inspired creative endeavours in others parts of the world. Most importantly, the increased market for Amoy-dialect films in 1950s Taiwan led directly to local Taiwanese directors and producers trying their hand at the production of Hokkien films. It is no coincidence that the first Hokkien film to be made in Taiwan was shot in 1955, just as the Amoy-dialect opera films were reaching a peak. Nor is it any coincidence that Taiwan-produced Hokkien films, like their Hong Kong-produced cousins were, at first, inspired largely by Hokkien opera, before branching out into other genres.

Most cultural historians identify Taiwan-produced Hokkien films from the *Xiayupian* genre by referring to such films as ‘*Taiyupian*’—‘Taiwanese language films’. Yet it is significant that from the mid- to late 1950s, the distinction between the two was far from clear. Amoy-dialect films were advertised in Taiwan—one of their largest markets—not as ‘*Xiayupian*’ but as *Taiyupian*, just as Taiwan-produced films were. Equally, films that are now identified as being genuine *Taiyupian* were distributed as *Minnanyupian* (Films in southern *Min*) in parts of Southeast Asia. Whilst such differences may reflect, above all, marketing preferences amongst film distributors and exhibitors, they also suggest that the boundaries between the two were largely irrelevant when it came to Hokkien-speaking audiences. Hokkien films of both Hong Kong and Taiwan origin competed for the same Hokkien markets.

Moreover, there was a constant flow of celebrities between Taipei and Hong Kong in the 1950s, so much so that the two cities shared a largely centralized reservoir of on-screen Hokkien talent. Indeed, a browse through the annals of both *Xiayupian* and *Taiyupian* will reveal many of the same names: Sio Kwan, Xiao Yanqiu, Bai Lan, Bai Hong, Bai Yun, Jiang

³³ Liu Xing, ‘Xiao Juan yaozuo ‘sanlou dongwu’’ [Sio Kwan wants to be a ‘three-storey animal’], *Yinhe Huabao* [Milky Way Pictorial] 35 (1961.1): 28-29.

Fan.³⁴ There were also instances of Hong Kong- and Taiwan-based companies cooperating in starting courses in acting for Hokkien performers, in casting and in producing films.³⁵ So although it is clear that Taiwan-based producers of Hokkien films were at one level competing with *Xiayupian* in both Taiwan and Southeast Asia, there was also a good deal of movement and cross-fertilisation between the two. Indeed, it could well be argued that the Hokkien entertainment industry in this early period was one that had no single centre, but revolved around three centres of production: Hong Kong, Taipei and, to a lesser extent, Singapore.

Yet there *were* differences between the ways in which Hokkien was brought to the screen in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and these reflected differences in the historical and political situation in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as the changing nature of Hokkien-speaking markets. For example, unlike the Amoy-dialect films, *Taiyupian* were the product of Fujian-born intellectuals who had moved to Taiwan prior to 1949,³⁶ as well as Japanese-trained Taiwanese who had returned to the island after the end of the Second World War. Individuals such as the film director He Jiming and the song-writer Yang Sanlang—who penned the music for many *Taiyu* films and whose popular songs inspired the storylines of a number of others—were instrumental in bringing skills and ideas learnt in Japan to Hokkien cinema and music in Taiwan. As we shall see below, the influence of Japanese popular culture would begin to assert itself by the early 1960s in Taiwan-produced Hokkien products.

Nevertheless, many of the same standards that had been set in the Hong Kong-produced Amoy-dialect films again came to dominate the Hokkien entertainment industry in Taiwan. *Taiyupian* developed a reputation for being highly predictable and of poor quality compared

³⁴ Indeed, as the Taiwanese cultural historian Ye Longyan has shown, there existed, from 1958 at least, a trend for Hokkien-speaking actors who had already started acting in *Taiyupian* to travel to Hong Kong and make a name for themselves in the *Xiayupian* industry, perhaps because it was believed that a stint in the crown colony would enhance their fame. See Ye Longyan, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁵ Ye Longyan, 'Taiyupian yu Xiayupian da duijue' [Competition between Amoy-dialect films and Taiwanese films], *Taipei wenxian* (2000.3): 121.

³⁶ Such as the directors Bai Ke and Li Jia. Li Yongquan, *Taiwan dianying yuelan* [A Taiwan cinema reader] (Taipei: Yushan She, 1998), p. 12; on the movement of performers, opera troupes and intellectuals between Xiamen and Taipei in the same era, and its effect on the Taiwan film industry, see *Taiyupian Shidai* [The age of Taiwanese movies] (Taipei: Guojia Dianying Ziliao Guan, 1994), pp. 114-117.

to Mandarin films and songs.³⁷ A willingness to ‘Hokkienise’ films (and, later, music) that had first appeared in other languages or dialects became a hallmark of Taiwanese cultural production during this period. For instance, the Hokkien music industry in Taiwan was completely dominated by an entire genre of tune known as the ‘*hunxue ge*’, or ‘hybrid song’—songs in which Hokkien lyrics were set to Japanese *enka* melodies. Many of the best-known standards of the Taiwanese Hokkien repertoire can be traced to this trend.³⁸

As mention of music suggests, the association between live musical performance and film which had been established in Hong Kong also became a feature of Hokkien cultural production in Taiwan. The practice of *suipian dengtai* was emulated, with celebrities being expected to be as adept at stage performances as they were at on-screen portrayals.³⁹ Indeed, it is instructive that the rise of *Taiyupian* coincided with what one scholar has referred to as the ‘heyday of Taiwanese language [sic]...popular songs’⁴⁰ insofar as films provided an alternative avenue of cultural expression for songwriters and singers. The distinction between Hokkien music and film became even more blurred in Taiwan than it had been in the Amoy-dialect films, the two being virtually inseparable for much of the 1960s, with Hokkien actors turning to the recording of popular music, and singers trying their hand at acting. And within the wailing tones of Hokkien *enka* tunes that were entering Taiwan via the above-mentioned ‘hybrid songs’, the tradition of the *khau-tiau-a* that had been first brought to the screen in the Amoy-dialect opera films came to be perfected in 1960s Taiwan.

Yet despite criticism of poor quality and predictability, both Taiwan-produced Hokkien cinema and songs continued to thrive into the mid-1960s, even while the Amoy-dialect films of Hong Kong started to decline in popularity. Indeed, by the mid-1960s, Hong Kong companies that had specialised in the making of Hokkien films and records had almost all either closed down or moved to the production of Mandarin and Cantonese products. In

³⁷ ‘The popular view today’, wrote the film critic Huang Ren in 1957, ‘is that *Taiyupian* are seen as being a grade lower than Mandarin films. But this view is not accurate, and should be broken’. Huang Ren, *Taiwan yingping liushi nian: Taiwan yingping shihua* [Sixty years of film critique in Taiwan: the truth of film critique in Taiwan] (Taipei: Yatai Tushu, 2004), p. 103.

³⁸ Jeremy E. Taylor, ‘Pop music as postcolonial nostalgia in Taiwan’, in Allen Chun, Ned Rossiter and Brian Shoemith (eds), *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia: Cosmopolitan flows, Political Tempos and Aesthetic Industries* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 173-182.

³⁹ Huang Ren, *Beiqing Taiyupian* [Tragic Taiwanese cinema] (Taipei: Wan Xiang, 1994), pp. 38-40.

⁴⁰ Edwin A. Winckler, ‘Cultural policy on post-war Taiwan’, in Stevan Harrell and Huang Chün-chieh (eds), *Cultural Change in Post-war Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 31.

contrast, over a hundred Hokkien movies and several hundred Hokkien songs were being produced annually in Taiwan by 1966.⁴¹

The decline of the Amoy-dialect films left much of the Southeast Asian Hokkien market open to Taiwanese companies and investors. Yet it also meant that Taipei suddenly found itself to be the only place in which mass, commercial Hokkien entertainment was being produced in any volume, and this began to show in the sorts of films and songs that were being produced. The very names of many of the Hokkien films that were produced in Taiwan in the 1960s demonstrate the increasingly local nature of the production of commercial Hokkien entertainment in this era: film-makers and songwriters in this period largely replaced the deterritorialised nature of earlier opera films, melodramas and comedies in favour of films that found their inspiration in the toponyms and local scenery of Taiwan. Plots played out amongst the hot springs of Beitou, the wharves of Kaohsiung or on the ‘the last train out of Taipei’ became the norm; songs about falling in love in Anping marked a move away from a search for international Hokkien markets—for which Taipei, Beitou, Kaohsiung or Anping meant little—and towards an entirely local audience. What had been a vibrant, multinational industry in the mid 1950s was a purely Taiwanese one by the end of the following decade.

THE ASCENDANCY OF MANDARIN AND THE POLITICISATION OF HOKKIEN

Whilst it is true that the Chinese Nationalists had long been suspicious of popular culture in dialects,⁴² and that they had tried to restrict the everyday use of Hokkien on Taiwan since 1948, it was not until the mid- to late 1960s that this began to influence the production of films and music in this dialect. The banning of the broadcast of popular songs along both moral and linguistic grounds began in earnest in 1961.⁴³ This was followed some years later by the labelling of Hokkien songs, as an entire genre, as ‘vulgar’ (*mimi zhi yin*).⁴⁴ And with the introduction in 1966 of the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement by Chiang Kai-

⁴¹ The reasons for this shall be examined further below.

⁴² Both on the mainland and on Taiwan: the Nationalists had banned the production of Cantonese films in the 1936-37 period, for instance, because of a belief that such films undermined a sense of national unity in China. On this point, see Poshek Fu, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

⁴³ Sun Songtang, ‘Tamen weihe bei jin, jin, jin...: Zhuisi Taiwan jin’ge shi’ [Why were they banned, banned, banned? Tracing the history of banned songs in Taiwan], *Zhongguo Shibao*, 30 October 1996, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Tan Shi, ‘Taiwan liuxing yinyue de lishi fang’an’ [The historical design of Taiwanese popular music], *Lianhe Wenxue* [Unitas] 82 (1991.8): 73

shek—a campaign in which Chinese ‘high culture’ was promoted at the expense of what were seen as a regional and divisive ‘local’ cultures—any form of cultural expression in Hokkien became subject to both control and official dissuasion.⁴⁵

The suppression of Hokkien popular culture (together with the concurrent promotion of Mandarin and Chinese ‘high culture’ on Taiwan, and the rise of the commercial Mandarin entertainment industry) also coincided with the introduction of television in the mid-1960s. This was a media that, by virtue of its ubiquity and ability to influence a far wider audience than film or recorded music, was closely monitored by the Nationalist authorities. It is no coincidence that while there had never been restrictions on the number of hours a cinema could devote to the exhibition of Hokkien films in Taiwan, there were restrictions on the amount of time (no more than a single hour per day for each channel) that could be spent broadcasting dialects on Taiwanese television from the early 1970s onwards.⁴⁶

The introduction of such broadcast policies did not completely destroy Hokkien cultural production. There remained a marginal market for Hokkien soap operas on Taiwanese television, a small number of *Taiyupian* were still made during the 1970s, and singers continued to record songs in Hokkien. Yet in all these instances, there could be little comparison with the vibrancy of the era between the late 1950s and mid-1960s. As a result, many people who had started their careers in Hokkien cultural production switched to Mandarin, or left the industry altogether.

Another effect of restrictions on the broadcast of Hokkien during this period was the ascendancy of live performance. Indeed, it was only by performing live that many Hokkien singers were able to make a living. As such, Hokkien came to be largely associated with the nightclubs and bars around Taiwan in which it was performed. This, in turn, saw Hokkien popular music come to be associated with the underworld and the margins of Taiwanese

⁴⁵ As Allen Chun has suggested, this was closely linked to the events of the Cultural Revolution in China; the Nationalist regime was keen to present itself as a protector of China’s ‘great traditions’ while these very same traditions were being destroyed on the mainland. Allen Chun, ‘From nationalism to nationalizing: Cultural imagination and state formation in post-war Taiwan’, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 31 (1994.1): 51-75.

⁴⁶ On the debates about the broadcast time allotted to Hokkien programmes during the 1960s and 1970s, see He Yimou, *Taiwan dianshi fengyun lu* [A record of major events at Taiwan Television] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu, 2002), pp. 180-182.

society, and the figure of the *jiujianü* (bar girl) roundly celebrated in the lyrics of Hokkien pop.⁴⁷ Many of the Hokkien performers who would, in later decades, come to the fore—singers such as Jiang Hui and Wang Yee Ling, for example—trace their careers to live performance in the bars of Taipei during the 1970s.⁴⁸

Most significantly of all, however, was that restrictions on the broadcast of Hokkien songs, films and television programmes had the effect of politicising the use of this dialect in Taiwan. For instance, because the singing of a song in *Taiyu* was now subject to political controls, it became a largely political act, regardless of whether or not the song itself was of a political nature.

In Southeast Asia, political, market and social forces also began to influence the production and reception of Hokkien-based popular culture. In particular, the shift towards the use of either Mandarin or local languages amongst younger members of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia—a trend that reflected changing affiliations,⁴⁹ and the blurring of what had been far more highly-defined distinctions amongst ‘dialect groups’ in the region in earlier decades—meant that songs and films produced in Hokkien were increasingly associated with an older generation, and were thus largely unfashionable. The dominance of Hong Kong-produced Mandarin popular culture, popularised by the likes of the Shaw Brothers, also saturated the Southeast Asian Chinese market, and reflected the ways in which Mandarin was becoming a language of choice amongst locally-born Chinese.

Yet government policy also played a role, just as it was doing in Taiwan. Changes to educational policies introduced in the 1960s (such as the introduction of ‘Mother Tongue’ education in Singapore) had the effect of subsuming what had otherwise been quite separate

⁴⁷ Often to the chagrin of those who seek to portray Hokkien popular music as a symbol of a ‘healthy’ Taiwanese nationalism. For an example of such criticisms, see Qiu Chuizhen, ‘Cong “chi-tho lang”, “Wunü”, “Jiunü” dao “gan yi bei”’ [From ‘bad boys’, ‘dancing girls’ and ‘bar girls’ to ‘cheers’], *Taiwan Xin Wenhua* [New Taiwan Culture] 1 (1986.9): 26-33.

⁴⁸ Wang Yee Ling was interviewed on the 11 December 1999 episode of the Taiwanese variety show *Chaoji Xingqitian* [Super Sunday], aired on the Chinese Television System (Hua Shi) network, and spoke at length about how she had started singing in Hokkien and Japanese in bars around the Taipei suburb of Beitou as a teenager.

⁴⁹ Affiliation with the political Left and Right, or to specific political parties, replacing older dialect groupings. Ray Nyce, *Chinese New Villages in Malaya: A Community Study* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1973), p. 125.

modes of expression, with their own unique pasts and trajectories, into a rather vague designation called ‘dialect’.⁵⁰ In turn, ‘dialect’ was increasingly looked down upon in official discourse in Singapore, and was compared unflatteringly to Mandarin—one of the island’s four official languages. The ultimate mark of official disapproval came with the introduction of restrictions on the broadcast of dialects in Singapore in 1977,⁵¹ followed by the introduction of the Speak Mandarin Campaign two years later.⁵² In Malaysia, a policy of restricting the broadcast of any Chinese dialects or Mandarin from the time of the introduction of television in the 1960s until the mid-1980s had a similar, if not more detrimental, effect on the reception of Hokkien popular culture.⁵³

As in Taiwan, such trends did not spell a complete end to the Hokkien entertainment industry in the region. One could mention the continued role of the radio station Rediffusion in disseminating Hokkien cultural production through on-air story-telling and other forms of entertainment. Yet, as in Taiwan, such changes drove Hokkien entertainment off television and film screens and onto the stage. Local performers in Singapore and Malaysia, such as Linda Yong and Singapore’s ‘King of Hokkien pop’⁵⁴ Chen Jin Lang, continued to pursue careers in Hokkien entertainment, but did so mainly through live *getai* performance.

The disfavour with which various Asian governments viewed the production of commercial Hokkien popular music and television films also led to a certain stigma becoming attached to the use of the dialect in the region. What had in the 1950s been tolerated by central governments as an unappealing but unimportant regional tongue, had, by the late 1970s, become a symbol of vulgarity. Indeed, what Chua Beng Huat has described as the ‘...positioning of Hokkien as the language of the lowest social class, the marginally

⁵⁰ It remains the case in Singapore today that the English term ‘dialect’ is often used as a kind of synonym for Hokkien, despite the fact that Hokkien is but one of many Chinese dialects spoken in the city.

⁵¹ Interestingly, Singapore looked to Taiwan (and Hong Kong) for expertise on how to restrict the broadcast of dialects in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the state-owned Singapore Broadcasting Corporation employing ‘dubbers’ from Taiwan to assist in rendering Cantonese television dramas which were being shown in Singapore at the time into Mandarin. Lim Kay Tong, *On Television in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, 1988), p. 63.

⁵² Wendy Bockhorst-Heng, ‘Singapore’s *Speak Mandarin Campaign*: Language ideological debates in the imagining of the nation’, in Jean Blommaert (ed), *Language Ideological Debates* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 235-265.

⁵³ Sharon A. Carstens, *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese worlds* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), p. 182.

⁵⁴ ‘Don’t cry for me’, *The Straits Times*, 10 July 2005, p. L4.

employed, the unemployed and the unemployable’⁵⁵ in more recent representations in Singapore film can be traced back to the positions taken by various Asian governments in regards to the uses and broadcasting of Hokkien in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁶

Developments in the 1970s thus also had ramifications for the ways in which Hokkien popular culture was thought and written about, for the rapid decline of a Hokkien recording and film industry from the late 1960s onwards translated into a tendency to forget that such industries had ever existed in the first place.⁵⁷ In much of the literature concerning the use of Hokkien in Taiwanese New Cinema or the Singaporean films of Jack Neo, and equally in the 1990s return to a tradition of regional tours by Hokkien singers such as Chen Lei and Wang Yee Ling—much in the manner of the *suipian dengtai*—little direct acknowledgement is made of the ‘golden years’ of Hokkien popular cultural production in the post-war decades.⁵⁸ It is almost as if the political marginalisation of Hokkien through the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in erasing not just much of Hokkien popular cultural production itself, but also the social memory of such production.

THE HOKKIEN RENAISSANCE OF THE 1990S

The cultural and political developments that occurred in Taiwan during the 1980s, and which led to the lifting of martial law in that country in December 1986, have been examined in great depth elsewhere, and need not be repeated in detail here.⁵⁹ Yet it is relevant that the political move away from the sinocentrism of earlier decades which occurred in tandem with democratisation on Taiwan had all kinds of ramifications for Hokkien cultural production in

⁵⁵ Chua Beng Huat, *Life is Not Complete without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1993), p. 161.

⁵⁶ What is most interesting here is that Hokkien was traditionally not a language solely of the working class on the Malay Peninsula. Hokkien-speaking migrants to Southeast Asia were, in fact, more closely associated with trade than with manual and rural labour.

⁵⁷ A recent example is June Yip, *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), in which it is falsely claimed that until the 1980s ‘the local dialect [i.e. Hokkien] was seldom if ever used in cinematic dialogue’ (p. 165).

⁵⁸ Indeed, performers themselves appear surprised to learn that a market for Hokkien popular songs has ever existed beyond Taiwan’s borders: Zhao Yafen, ‘Huang Yiling Xinjiapo kaichang, xia yi tiao’ [Wang Yee Ling was surprised when performing in Singapore], *Zhongguo shibao*, 11 December 2002, p. 27. The first line of the article reads: ‘She [i.e. Wang Yee Ling] originally thought Hokkien songs had been banned locally; she had never thought that the reaction of fans [in Singapore] would be so intense’.

⁵⁹ A recent examination of localisation can be found in John Makeham and A-chin Hsiao (eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentuhua* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

the 1990s. Indeed, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Hokkien lay at the very heart of the so-called ‘localisation movement’ (*bentuhua yundong*), insofar as it was identified as being the ‘local’ language of the island. And Hokkien has since emerged as a symbol for many of the same groups that promoted a greater awareness of local culture and history in the first place.

The shift towards a more open society that emerged alongside localisation not only resulted in the lifting of media bans and restrictions on the broadcast of Hokkien in Taiwan, but also translated into official encouragement for the use of a dialect during the years of the Lee Teng-hui presidency. Furthermore, the introduction of new media technologies, most noticeably cable television and karaoke, provided new means by which Hokkien songs, films and other art forms could be produced and marketed. This coalescence between political reforms, cultural change and technological advances gave rise in the 1990s to a renaissance in Hokkien cultural expression, and a revival of the hitherto moribund Hokkien entertainment industry. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, Hokkien was being heard everywhere on Taiwan, and the production of Hokkien cultural products was reaching levels it had not seen since the late 1950s.

In the rush to rediscover, reinvent and remarket Hokkien in the 1990s, however, Taiwan’s entertainment industry faced a problem. On account of the substantial damage that had been rendered by the broadcast restrictions of earlier decades, there were few immediate local precedents upon which record companies and television stations could rely in the search for inspiration and talent. The result was that the late-1950s to early 1960s, being the last major period of Hokkien cultural production, were called upon to provide the standards by which the Hokkien popular culture industry could define itself in post-martial law Taiwan.

This tendency to find inspiration in the post-war decades could be found in almost all spheres of cultural production. On Taiwanese television screens in the 1990s, audiences were treated to unabashed nostalgia for a pre-industrial, Hokkien-speaking world of the early post-war period.⁶⁰ A substantial proportion of Hokkien television dramas that were produced in 1990s by people such as Li Peng, for example, looked unambiguously to the 1950s and 1960s for

⁶⁰ Jeremy E. Taylor, ‘Images of the Hometown: the clash of city and village in Taiwanese popular songs’, *Chime* 16-17 (2005.12): 72-87.

plots.⁶¹ Many television dramas in fact took their titles from Hokkien songs of the 1950s or from storylines found in both the *Xiayupian* and *Taiyupian* genre; others followed the *Xiayupian* practice of inventing storylines around popular Hokkien myths or stories.⁶²

In terms of music, the re-recording and re-mixing of Hokkien ‘hybrid songs’ from the 1960s also took precedence. In other instances, and in the songs recorded by artistes who had started their careers in the nightclubs of Taipei in the 1970s, there was an attempt to reproduce a 1950s and 1960s ‘*fugu*’ (nostalgic) sound and aesthetic. The bar and drinking songs popularised by the likes of Jiang Hui—the so-called ‘queen of Taiwanese pop’ during the 1990s⁶³—were emblematic of this, often referring musically and lyrically to the early post-war period, as well as to the tradition of the melancholic *khau-tiau-a* that the Amoy-dialect films had brought to the screen.⁶⁴

Even more interestingly, many of the precedents that had been set in the late 1950s not only came back to shape Hokkien popular culture in late-1990s Taiwan, but were actually celebrated as integral parts of the revived Hokkien entertainment industry. Some of the most commercially-successful Hokkien television dramas, for instance, continue to be criticised as being of poor artistic and dramatic quality—the most recent example being SETTV’s immensely successful though also often lampooned, *Taiwan Longjuanfeng* (Taiwan Hurricane).⁶⁵

⁶¹ Li Xianwen, *Taiwan dianshi wenyi zonglan* [A reading of Taiwanese television] (Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe, 1997), p. 89.

⁶² Mazu (the goddess of the sea and a deity worshipped by Hokkien speakers all over Asia) and the Bodhisattva Guanyin, for example, were both the subjects of 1950s Amoy-dialect films and 1990s Taiwanese Hokkien television dramas.

⁶³ Government Information Office, *The Republic of China Yearbook 1995* (Taipei: Government Information Office, 1995), p. 421.

⁶⁴ Taylor, ‘Popular Music as Postcolonial Nostalgia’, 178-180.

⁶⁵ In music, also, *Taiyuge* have often been critically derided for their tendency to build on a limited and highly predictable set of lyrical and musical clichés. Indeed, the belief amongst sections of Taiwan’s cultural elite that Hokkien popular songs were of a poor standard was revealed at Taiwan’s Golden Melody Awards (*Jinqu jiang*) in 2003, when the award for best male Hokkien singer was awarded to none of the three artistes nominated—a decision which stirred heated debates in the industry about different standards between Mandarin and *Taiyu*. Liu Weili, ‘Changpian ye: pingshen jianta Taiyuge’ (Recording industry: the judges have trodden on Hokkien songs), *Lianhe Bao*, 7 August 2003, p. D2; Duan Zhenzhen and Su Weiquan, ‘Taiyu changpian gongsi lianhe qiangsheng’ [Hokkien record companies unite to cause a stir], *Ziyou shibao*, 7 August 2003, p. 31

Moreover, the very marginalisation that Hokkien had suffered in the 1960s and 1970s came to be publicly celebrated in the world of entertainment during the 1990s and into the new century. The increasing use of the term ‘*Tai*’ (literally ‘Taiwanese’) was deployed in the entertainment media, to signify many of the decidedly unglamorous, outmoded and garish aesthetics of commercial Hokkien popular culture.⁶⁶

As this link between Hokkien popular culture and Taiwanese-ness might suggest, the Hokkien cultural renaissance on Taiwan has been intimately linked to political and cultural debates. Indeed, in a context in which all things ‘*Tai*’ are now celebrated, Hokkien popular culture has gained unprecedented levels of political importance. This has meant that many of the traditions that developed in response to purely commercial concerns now reinterpreted as expressions of a unique Taiwanese identity. For instance, the melancholic *khau-tiau-a*—inherited from the opera films of the 1950s and perfected in the ‘hybrid songs’ of the 1960s—is now reinterpreted by nativist intellectuals and politicians as an expression of Taiwanese anguish after years of marginalisation at the hands of the KMT.

If there were ever any doubt about the importance that the current pro-independence administration in Taipei attaches to commercial Hokkien popular culture, one need look no further than the increased levels of interaction between the world of entertainment and the sphere of nativist politics. The appointment of Jiang Hsia (an actress who had made a name for herself in Taiwan by starring in Hokkien soap operas), as the head of the state-run Chinese Television System (*Hua Shi*) in June 2004 was powerful in its symbolism: Hokkien-speaking celebrities were being given leave to direct cultural and broadcasting policies; the popular appeal of Hokkien popular culture was being channelled into the nation-building efforts of a pro-independence administration. Nor is it insignificant that Hokkien singers are often called upon to perform at election rallies; that Hokkien popular songs are themselves reinvented as electoral campaign songs by politicians; or that Taiwanese legislators make a point of either being able to sing Hokkien standards or recite lines from popular Hokkien television dramas.

⁶⁶ Indeed, there have been attempts to academically study what this term means, and the wider social significance of its usage, particularly by the sociologist Liu Weigong.

Given such government support, it is hardly surprising that Hokkien music and television have become closely associated solely with Taiwan in other parts of the world since the 1990s.⁶⁷ Indeed, so close has the link between Taiwan and the use of Hokkien become that the two have, in some parts of Asia, become inseparable.

While it was in Singapore and Malaysia that live performances by Taiwan-based Hokkien singers⁶⁸ and the sale of Taiwan-produced Hokkien albums peaked in the 1997-98 period, it is Taiwan that has now replaced these societies as the undisputed centre of world Hokkien cultural production. Southeast Asian actors seeking to pursue a career in Hokkien cultural production must now travel to Taiwan to act in Hokkien television dramas, and adopt a Taiwanese Hokkien accent and ‘*Tai*’ style if they expect to succeed. The few Southeast Asian producers of Hokkien products that still operate, such as Malaysia’s New Southern Records, have been forced to repackage Hokkien songs of Taiwan origin for dwindling local markets.⁶⁹

Similarly, the consumption of Taiwan-produced Hokkien songs and television dramas in China’s Fujian province appears not only to have arisen as a result of a shared dialect across the Taiwan Strait, but just as importantly because of a desire on the part of a newly-prosperous Xiamen to consume explicitly *Taiwanese* products.⁷⁰ In other words, through the rise of the 1990s Hokkien renaissance, an entertainment industry that started as a completely transnational endeavour has been reinvented and repackaged as being a purely local, Taiwanese project. Taiwanese cable television networks and record companies have not only succeeded in finding new markets in places such as the PRC, but have also been responsible

⁶⁷ On a completely unrelated visit to Hong Kong in mid-1998, I was intrigued to find that numerous Taiwan-produced Hokkien CDs and videos were being sold in a night market in Mongkok, but that these appeared to be being sold not to Hokkien speakers, but as a part of a trend in Hong Kong at the time for ‘things Taiwanese’ which went beyond music and television, and included food and fashion. In other words, it appeared that such products were not distinguished for their ‘Hokkien-ness’ but for their Taiwanese origin.

⁶⁸ ‘Hokkien pop concerts take off’, *The Straits Times*, 29 December 1997, L7.

⁶⁹ This is not to say that there are no Hokkien recording artistes in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. On the contrary, singers such as Malaysia’s so-called ‘Hokkien princess’ (*Fujian gongzhu*) Jacqueline Teo have indeed recorded Hokkien albums with the above-mentioned New Southern Records. Yet the fact that many of these songs are in fact Taiwanese ‘hybrid songs’ points to the dominance of Taiwan as a source of Hokkien cultural products in the current era.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Gregory Eliyu Guldin, *What’s a peasant to do? Village becoming town in southern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), pp. 122 and 157.

for encouraging the creation of a cross-Strait community of Hokkien-speaking consumers who are, ironically, extremely ‘*Tai*’ in their tastes.⁷¹

There are recent signs, however, that things may be changing, for in one of the many ironies that have shaped the history of modern Hokkien cultural production, the very songs and television programmes that have been held up by enthusiastic nativist politicians in Taiwan who oppose greater rapprochement across the Taiwan Strait are now finding a market of significant size in communist China. In other words, the nativist renaissance on Taiwan has resulted not only in louder calls for political independence for Taiwan, but also, conversely, in greater levels of cultural interaction between Taiwan and southern Fujian.

Even more significant is the fact that the consumption of this resurgent Hokkien popular culture in Fujian has led to a rediscovery of a transnational history of cultural production in the one part of the Hokkien-speaking world (i.e., Fujian) that was largely cut off from this industry in its ‘golden years’. Inspired by events on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, and influenced perhaps by increasing trade contacts between the two, government and business interests in Fujian are now encouraging events such as international Hokkien singing competitions,⁷² while Fujian-based media interests are presenting awards to Taiwanese performers for their contributions to Hokkien pop.⁷³ That Xiamen-based journalists and scholars are now also claiming the 1950s *Xiayupian* genre as something of Fujianese—rather than Hong Kong, Taiwanese or Southeast Asian—origin says something about the changing fortunes of this dialect over the last half century.⁷⁴

⁷¹ This is not something restricted to entertainment; it can also be seen in the emergence of Hokkien popular religion ‘rooted in the rural and working classes’ on either side of the Strait. See Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, ‘Goddess across the Taiwan Strait: Matrifocal Ritual Space, Nation-State, and Satellite Television Footprints’, *Public Culture* 16.2 (2004): 209-238.

⁷² The first was held in Jinjiang in 2006 and involved performers not only from Taiwan and Fujian, but also from Southeast Asia and North America.

⁷³ As in the case of Fujian Dongnan Dianshitai (Fujian Southeast Television)’s presentation of an award to the Taiwanese singer Chen Lei in November 2006. ‘Chenji duoshi, Chen Lei huo Lu ban gongxian jiang’ [After lying low for some time, Chen Lei wins a prize for his contributions on the mainland], TVBS news report, 14 November 2006.

⁷⁴ As in the rediscovery of the Amoy-dialect films by Xiamen-based journalists and intellectuals. See, for example, Jiang Shaoyao, ‘Xiamenhua dianying ceng jiaozuo haiwai shichang’ [Amoy-dialect films once claimed an overseas market], *Xiamen Ribao*, 18 May 2004.

RECONSIDERING A REGIONAL ENTERTAINMENT HISTORY

Popular culture emanating in the predominantly Chinese societies of Taiwan and Hong Kong over the past two decades has inspired a wealth of academic research. Interest in the mass media as ‘...one of the most prolific arenas for transnational culture sharing among the Chinese population today’⁷⁵ has largely come to eclipse an earlier concentration of ‘cultural China’ in appreciation of the ways in which cultural products are traded between and beyond different sections of the Chinese world. In post-economic-reform China, Hong Kong and other ‘...cities of the south China coast...’ have been described as having ‘...remerged as leading centers of transnational economic activity and cultural production’.⁷⁶ The commercial success of cultural production in Hong Kong, Taiwan and, more recently Shanghai, has been viewed as the result of a natural ‘southern Chinese’ propensity for trade and liberal thought.

Tied to this is idea of a resurgent ‘southern Chinese’ popular culture, has been the sense that such a culture, being market-driven, has challenged national government control in the region. The ‘free-wheeling’ spirit supposedly found in the Taiwan and Hong Kong entertainment industries, it is assumed, has inspired all kinds of post-nation-state ‘imaginaries’ amongst ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere; these have undermined the idea of a single, Chinese state in the form of the PRC. As the anthropologist Mayfair Yang has put it: ‘...new forms of mass media and popular culture have generated sentiments towards eluding and transcending ...[the] state...with the creation of transnational cultural subjectivity in the exposure to an ethnic overseas Chinese capitalism’.⁷⁷

Yet in studying cultural production in Taiwan and Hong Kong—and in attaching to it the ‘catch-all’ label of *GangTai* (literally ‘Hong Kong and Taiwan’)—scholars have tended to concentrate on the increasing sameness of the popular culture emanating within what are

⁷⁵ Sharon A. Carstens, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁷⁶ Carolyn Cartier, *Globalizing South China* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2001), esp. 34.

⁷⁷ Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, ‘Mass Media and Transnational Subjectivity in Shanghai: Notes on (Re)Cosmopolitanism in a Chinese Metropolis’, in Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini (eds), *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 311.

vastly different societies, while playing down the different traditions that have developed within popular cultural production in and between these societies.⁷⁸

The problem with such an approach is that it has seen forms of popular culture which emanate in Hong Kong and Taiwan, but which do not resemble *GangTai* culture in their development, slip between the proverbial cracks. As I hope to have shown in this paper, the commercial Hokkien entertainment industry—from the Amoy-dialect films of Hong Kong to the soap operas of today's Taiwan—did, of course, develop within the Hong Kong-Taiwan axis. Hokkien popular culture in Asia was also subject to an intricate network of influences, from *gezaxi* to Japanese *enka* music, to say nothing of the international Mandarin entertainment market which was largely complicit in the decline of dialect-based entertainment in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet Hokkien popular culture also developed along its own trajectory, one which was concurrent with but separate from the world of Cantonese or Mandarin entertainment. Indeed, when we look beyond the much-studied world of mainstream Mandarin film and music over the last half a century, we find not so much a single world of Chinese cultural production, but a set of interconnected and overlapping industries which frequently run parallel to one another, yet which just as frequently responded to quite different political, social and economic forces.

Moreover, the trajectory followed by Hokkien popular culture over the last two decades has not conformed to the assumptions made about southern Chinese cultural production in recent academic studies. Though this industry first developed within the *laissez-faire* markets of post-war East and Southeast Asia, it has not, by and large, played a role in challenging state narratives about ethnicity and identity. However, the 1990s Hokkien renaissance, though born of commercial concerns, has been largely co-opted into a state-sponsored project of nation-building in Taiwan. Nor has it challenged Beijing's efforts to promote a shared history or experience across the Taiwan Strait. Indeed, in recent times, the rediscovery in Xiamen of a shared entertainment culture based in Hokkien has been used to promote cross-Strait ties. In neither case has Hokkien cultural production challenged the dominance of the state.

⁷⁸ Thomas B. Gold, 'Go with your feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan popular culture in Greater China', in D. Shambaugh (ed), *Greater China: The Next Superpower?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 255-273.

Nor is there any evidence to suggest that this industry has arisen as the representation of some kind of ‘pan-Hokkien imaginary’ throughout Asia. On the contrary, the very real possibility of the creation of some kind of pan-Hokkien imaginary that may have existed in the films and songs of the late 1950s has been successfully destroyed by governments, and equally erased from the social memory in more recent times. In its place, we find a mode of cultural expression which finds its history in a time of far closer interaction amongst Hokkien-speaking peoples in the region, yet which has come to define itself through the only society in which it still finds a sizeable market—Taiwan.