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Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China

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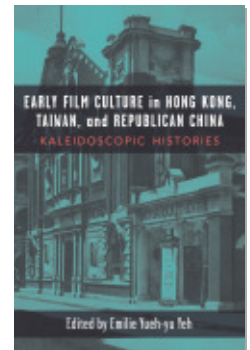
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CHAPTER 6

The Way of The Platinum Dragon

Xue Juexian and the Sound of Politics in 1930s Cantonese Cinema

Kenny K. K. Ng

PROLOGUE

In 1936, a Shanghai movie magazine carried a gossip column on Cantonese opera maestro Xue Juexian (Sit Gok-sin, 1904–1956), titled “Xue Juexian Remakes *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two*.”¹ The subtitle of the article, however, issued an unfriendly warning to Xue: “It is hoped that he would better check the censorship order beforehand.” Just one year before, another Shanghai journal reported that Xue had set up his own film company in Hong Kong to produce Cantonese sound films. Meanwhile, he was going to refuse to submit his new films to the Nanjing government censors for inspection.² The two pieces of entertainment news give us a glimpse of the cultural politics of popular Cantonese talkies in the mid-1930s, namely, the feud between the thriving Cantonese film industries and the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government in Nanjing in enforcing restrictions on Cantonese-speaking films. The 1930s was also a crucial moment for Chinese cinema in its transition from silent picture to sound film productions. In 1933, Shaw Zuiweng (Runje Shaw, 1896–1975) of Shanghai’s Unique Film Company (Tianyi) collaborated with Xue to produce the first Cantonese sound film, *The Platinum Dragon* (*Baijinlong*, dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1933), and it became an instant hit at home and abroad. *The Platinum Dragon* was one of the top-grossing films in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macau, and

Southeast Asia. Soon Cantonese talkies blossomed and took the market by storm as the lure of lucrative profits attracted both local and foreign capital as well as filmmaking talents to Cantonese filmmaking.

What lies behind Xue Juexian's alleged move to repudiate the Nationalist government's imposed restrictions on Cantonese-language film productions has to do with the politics of sound and spoken language in Chinese cinema. Xue's story constitutes a critical chapter and yet a missing episode of Chinese film historiography and Cantonese film culture during Chinese cinema's transition from the silent to the sound stage. When cultural bureaucrats of the Nationalist regime introduced censorial mechanisms and tried to intervene in Chinese film productions in the 1930s, they campaigned to drive out the martial arts genre, ghost movies, and immoral stories from mainstream cinema houses, as they were deemed a threat to the regime's goal of nation-building. Whereas the tabooed subjects of the superstitious, the supernatural, and the racy in early Republican cinema recently have generated scholarly discussions,³ Cantonese sound film developments and the linguistic-cultural debates on dialect films have yet to be addressed.

Cantonese filmmaking was always torn between political alignment with the nation and its pursuits of commercial interest and entertainment value. Nationalist screen policies went on offense against Cantonese talkies because censors suspected that they would hinder the linguistic and political unification of the nation. Besides obvious political motivations on the side of the government, the campaign to curb Cantonese-dialect films manifested the enduring rivalry between Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking pictures that was born alongside Chinese sound films. With the arrival of sound in Chinese films, the Hong Kong–Guangdong region emerged as the largest production center of Cantonese talkies, exporting its product not only to Cantonese-speaking communities in South China, but also to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America. Furthermore, the assimilation of Cantonese opera performance into talking pictures with the popularization of gramophone records created a vibrant commercial cinema with lucrative profits. In its rivalry with Shanghai-based Mandarin films for market share and cultural supremacy, Cantonese cinema was inevitably engaged in cultural politics on local, national, and transnational levels.

The Platinum Dragon, the first Cantonese talkie, is no longer extant, as many Cantonese films made before the 1950s have been lost. But the recent rediscovery of a corpus of early Cantonese talkies in the 1930s and 1940s, including Xue Juexian's *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* (Xu Baijinlong, 1937),

has provided archivists and scholars new access and renewed perspectives from which to reconstruct early Cantonese film history and aesthetics.⁴ What prompted the Cantonese opera artist to remake *The Platinum Dragon* in 1936? Did Xue use the remake of his film to respond to the Nationalist regime's challenging political demands and market constraints on Cantonese pictures? What does the sequel tell us about the generic and artistic characteristics of Cantonese cinema as a crossover between Cantonese theater and screen, and between Hollywood and Cantonese opera and film?

To begin with, *The Platinum Dragon* was initially one of Xue's successful opera-and-film fusions and theatrical productions of "Western-costume Cantonese opera" (*xizhuang yueju*). Xue's opera performance was adapted from the Hollywood film *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair), released in 1926. After producing the film sequel *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* in 1937 (codirected by Gao Lihen [Ko Lei-hen] and Xue himself), Xue remade part 1 of the story in 1947 as *The New Platinum Dragon* (*Xin Baijinlong*, dir. Yang Gongliang [Yeung Kung-leong]), which is similar to his 1933 film in terms of themes and plots.

The Platinum Dragon was obviously not a singular case (but the most successful one) of operatic adaptations and filmic remaking in early Cantonese film culture. But Xue's successful film marked a significant change by spawning a wave of popularity for Cantonese opera films in the 1930s. Yu Mo-wan argues that in their heyday, Cantonese opera films constituted a significant portion of Cantonese film production during the 1930s. These films were mostly based on old Cantonese opera plots, restaging the stories in contemporary contexts using modern costumes and scenery and still employing Cantonese opera songs.⁵ But the highly popular Cantonese opera cinema in early Chinese film historiography has been forgotten partly because most of these films no longer exist, and partly because they have been considered secondary in artistic merit in comparison with either stage opera performances or cinema itself, treated as mere popular entertainments for mass consumption.⁶

Among the many Cantonese opera films of merely entertainment value, however, the Cantonese operatic remakes of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* (1929) stand out as among the best works in the category. The Hollywood film was adapted into two "Western-costume Cantonese operas" in Shanghai's theaters in the early 1930s, starring respectively Xue Juexian and Ma Shizeng (1900–1964). It was Xue Juexian who went on to transform the Hollywood picture into a Cantonese film version, as *Xuangong yanshi* (liter-

ally, "An Amorous History in the Jade Palace," dir. Shao Zuiweng [Runje Shaw] in 1934.⁷ A versatile and leading opera performer with star power established on stage, Xue was quick to capitalize on the new media and delivery channels of gramophone, radio, and film, which in tandem gave birth to a new audiovisual entertainment culture in urban China during the early Republican era.⁸ Further, Xue's creative talents and entrepreneurial zeal enabled him to move between the various modes of cultural productions and across different fields of artistic and commercial activities.

Early Cantonese sound films drew on Western and Hollywood inspirations. They also had a close relationship with Cantonese theater, singers and actors crossing between the stage and screen in Hong Kong, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Southeast Asia.⁹ These intricate cultural-geographical circuits, with their constant transfer of capital, technology, agency, and talent, allow a critical conception of Cantonese cinema as translocal and transnational from its inception. This chapter offers a study of the texts and contexts of these two extant films of Xue, and seeks to raise issues of transnationality and intermediality in relation to Xue's pioneering Cantonese opera-film crossovers, and to ponder the political-cultural meanings of his Cantonese film-remaking in Cantonese cinema. Yiman Wang's study of the remakes of Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* by Xue Juexian and Ma Shizeng in their Cantonese opera film versions indicates the quintessential transborder flows between foreign cultures and local traditions in the development of Cantonese films, and in Xue's case, the abundant transcultural appropriations of stories, styles, and performance between Hollywood, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. Using Cantonese cinema as a prime example, Wang proposes the "transnational" as a methodology to "address the cultural politics in Chinese film production, distribution and exhibition."¹⁰ Resisting the claim of transnational cinema as an outcome of economic globalism and commodification, Wang seeks to redirect criticism to the importance of intercultural exchange and negotiation. She considers the "Western-costume Cantonese operas" as "foreignizing remakes," in which "the 'foreign' contributes to formulating Cantonese (and later on Hong Kong) cinema and the correlated lingual-cultural subject positioning" from the 1930s on.¹¹ It is in the vigorous interregional film activities that one finds the interplay between various Chinese filmmaking communities (especially between Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong) highly interactive, whereas their cultural borders are invariably being reshaped.

In distinction from Wang's ultimately theoretical reflection of "border

cultural politics in its enunciation, modes of address and exhibition” in transnational film studies, I am concerned about how Xue’s adventurous and commercial Westernized Cantonese opera films assimilate foreign elements in the Cantonese performance tradition and strategic practice to engage cultural politics on regional and national levels. My study of Xue’s Cantonese opera film remaking and adaptation of Hollywood puts his ventures within historical contexts in relation to the cultural politics of Cantonese-versus Mandarin-language cinema, dynamic regional flows between Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, and intergeneric adaptations between stage and screen. Historically, Xue’s artistic innovation and entrepreneurial vision could only be achieved in an intermediated environment with new technology transfer and exchange between the local theater and foreign cinema, a permeable border between performative art and commercial entertainment for urban consumers, and the transregional flow of capital and talent between Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Southeast Asia in which the craze for profit and the cultural politics of regional and national identities are contested. In studying Xue’s moves between different physical places and his strategy to reinvent Cantonese operatic and filmic genres, as a response to commercial and political crises confronting Cantonese cinema, we need to consider the artistic and pragmatic choices he made and how he wagered on the new genres and representations at various stages.

ENTER *THE PLATINUM DRAGON*: TRANSNATIONAL CIRCUITS OF COMMERCE, CANTONESE CINEMA, AND HOLLYWOOD

“The Platinum Dragon,” the hero played by Xue Juexian in 1933, unmistakably spells out the intimate interplay between early Cantonese movie culture and commercial business when entrepreneurs and performing artists joined hands to brand their products for mass consumption. It was a marketing strategy for Xue to name his Cantonese opera adaptation as *The Platinum Dragon* after the cigarette brand Golden Dragon produced by Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company. Golden Dragon Cigarettes was launched in 1925 and targeted local Chinese as well as overseas Chinese consumers in Southeast Asia. In the late 1920s, Nanyang approached Xue to help advertise its cigarette brand. Xue adapted his favorite Hollywood silent film *The*

Grand Duchess and the Waiter for the stage, and named his Western-style Cantonese opera fusion *The Platinum Dragon*.

By 1930, Shanghai had become a cultural and commercial hub for migrants from various regions in China with a sizable Cantonese-speaking community. Indeed, there were intimate triangular business and cultural connections between Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shanghai.¹² The market for Cantonese operas and films was promising enough for Xue to expand his operatic territory.¹³ When Xue's new Cantonese opera debuted in Shanghai in 1930, Nanyang gave the show a commercial boost by dispensing free cigarettes to theatergoers. Promotional banners were hung with the slogan "Watch *The Platinum Dragon*, Smoke Golden Dragon Cigarettes" (*Guan Baijinlong mingju, xi Baijinlong xiangyan*).¹⁴ Similar commercial gimmicks were reprised by Nanyang and Xue in promoting the film in 1933 with resounding success. Xue's "Western-costume Cantonese opera" reportedly won the favor of massive Cantonese audiences, including overseas Chinese in Vietnam and Cambodia. Apparently, the Cantonese sound film had a wide appeal to Cantonese-speaking spectators. *The Platinum Dragon* failed to impress the Shanghai audience due to dialectic differences, whereas it enjoyed extraordinary runs in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau, and later in Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Besides the factor of commercial collaboration that partially accounted for the success of the opera, the popularity of *The Platinum Dragon* can also be attributed to its variegated and mixed entertaining performances on stage, which made Cantonese opera look like a Hollywood vaudeville theater—a variety show featuring individual and social dancing, fighting scenes, and magic and hypnotic performances with modern music (electronic guitar) accompaniment within a Western-style stage set.¹⁶ It was a perfect case of "cross-media promotion" as the opera, the film, and the cigarette all won the (Cantonese) people over.¹⁷

Xue Juexian's enterprising crossover and visionary experimentation with new media technologies and genres are emblematic of the notion of "cultural entrepreneurship" in early twentieth-century Asia, which evinces "a pluralistic approach to the art and business of culture characterized by active participation in multiple modes of cultural production," and "involves the investment of both talent and capital in new enterprises."¹⁸ But Xue's biographical ventures and the historical vicissitudes of Cantonese operatic film experimentation certainly go beyond the surface of any general description of cultural risk-taking or entrepreneurship. Surviving the downturn of

Cantonese theaters in the late 1920s, Xue managed to build his stardom with his dynamic performances and eclectic style; his flair for crossing between different role-types on stage earned him the title “all-around master performer” (*wanneng laoguan*). In developing the hybrid genres of Western-style Cantonese opera and film, he was eager to learn from Beijing opera, modern spoken drama, and Hollywood cinema, absorbing elements “from facial cosmetics application to the introduction of violin and saxophone as regular instruments, from the more agile northern martial arts (of Peking [Beijing] opera) to the aesthetic of the silver screen.”¹⁹ Xue’s idea of artistic interaction between different cultural media and cultural expressions can be aptly summarized by his own projection on the Cantonese opera dream, which he considered a cross-fertilization of “the Cantonese-opera essence; northern-style technique; Beijing-opera martial arts; Shanghai-style tricks; the movie’s expression; drama ideologies, and Western stage settings.”²⁰ It is not difficult to surmise that his idea of Cantonese cinema should exhibit similar generic flexibility in assimilating foreign influences and diverse performative traditions into native styles.

Xue Juexian was brought up and educated in Hong Kong. He studied at St. Paul’s College, a well-known English-language school, but quit school at the age of sixteen because of family economic hardship. He embarked on his theatrical career when he was introduced to a troupe in Guangzhou in 1921. After a few years of apprenticeship and training, the young Xue was able to gain an early foothold in Guangzhou’s theatrical troupes with his assiduousness and gift for performance. He managed to get leading roles on stage in a few years. Soon after, Xue would make his dramatic move to Shanghai, where he had firsthand experience with the movie world. But his move to Shanghai was an expedient decision dictated by circumstances. In 1925, he was embroiled in a deadly gang fight in which Xue’s protector was gunned down. Xue had a narrow escape from death. Feeling that his life was threatened, Xue took off immediately for Shanghai and stayed there for over a year.²¹ His first brief sojourn in Shanghai proved to be an eye-opening and life-changing experience. More importantly, Xue saw the great potential of cinema as a new entertainment medium. In 1926, Xue founded the Feifei Movie Production Company in Shanghai. As the manager and director, he involved himself in the movie industry; he changed his name to Zhang Fei. He acted in the movie *The Shameless Girl* (*Lang die*, literally meaning “Waves of Butterflies”, dir. Zhang Fei, 1926), in which he played the male lead in the inaugural silent movie, with Tang Xueqing (1908–1955) in the leading

female role.²² Xue and Tang later got married, and Tang then played the female lead in *The Platinum Dragon* (1933) and *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* (1937). In 1932, when the Cantonese theater market in South China experienced an epic collapse, Xue went back to Shanghai to look for new opportunities. Xue used his contacts in the nascent filmmaking industry in Shanghai to make his popular film *The Platinum Dragon*.²³

Xue Juexian's venture into filmmaking in Shanghai coincided with the business ambition of Unique (later the Shaw Brothers) in extending its movie network across British Malaya and Singapore. *The Platinum Dragon* enjoyed such an enormous success that Runme and Run Run Shaw were convinced to turn to Cantonese filmmaking for the Southeast Asian market. In fact, the artistic and commercial achievements that Xue demonstrated in the early sound film helped to lay a foundation for Unique's populist approach and market scheme. The studio strategically used Hong Kong as a base of production in fostering the development of early Cantonese films in Southeast Asia.²⁴ But how should we reassess Xue as the cultural pioneer who hastened the artistic blending of Cantonese opera, Western theater, and modern cinema in his Western-style Cantonese opera-and-film? Significantly, how do we make sense of *The Platinum Dragon* and early Cantonese cinema's transnational encounter with Hollywood and the West within the cultural and historical contexts of the 1930s and 1940s? With no known copy of Xue Juexian's 1933 film extant, my study concerns *The New Platinum Dragon* in 1947. Based on the commonality of their story plots, Xue's 1947 remake was largely based on the 1933 film with some changes in plots and narrations.

Xue Juexian's filmic adaptation was inspired by *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter*, his favorite Hollywood silent picture. The Hollywood comedy is about a Parisian millionaire's (Albert Durant, played by Adolphe Menjou) efforts to woo the elegant Duchess Zenia (Florence Vidor), an exiled Russian aristocrat, by posing as a waiter in her service. Though the wealthy man is famous as a playboy with multiple assignments at the film's opening, he becomes devoted to the noblewoman from the first moment he sees her and is determined to win her over after some whimsical twists and turns. Recognized as a sophisticated comedy of 1920s akin to the high comedy of manners (best epitomized by the silent films of Ernst Lubitsch), *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* was praised by American film critics as having "the high standard of the wit" to delight the sophisticated audience as well as "the humor of the situations and lines" that could be grasped by anyone.²⁵

I argue that it was the game of love, the masquerade in performance, and the foreign/exotic spectacles offered by the Hollywood film that prompted Xue Juexian to re-create indigenized versions of the romantic comedy in Cantonese theater and onscreen. Love is central to Xue's film comedy, as in the American silent. In *The New Platinum Dragon*, a young and wealthy Chinese businessman, Bai Jinlong (Platinum Dragon, played by Xue) returns from San Francisco to Shanghai. On board a cruise ship he chances to meet Zhang Yuniang (Cheung Yuk-neung; played by Zheng Mengxia [Cheng Mang-ha]) and develops a crush on her. The man vows to marry her. Xue's adapted film gained much from Hollywood's sophisticated comedy—love is never taken for granted as a naively romantic idea; it has to be achieved with effort, care, and risk-taking. The plot unfolds as the hero, though rich and charming, has yet to undertake actions and make sacrifices to win the woman's heart and authenticate his sincere love. The male's courtship continues when he meets the woman for the second time at a New Year's costume ball. The ballroom scene is significant not because the Cantonese film can in any sense reproduce the glamorous *mise-en-scène* of the ballroom dancing in its Hollywood counterpart, which provides the fantasy of upper-class living. Rather, it gives Xue Juexian a chance for *tour de force* singing (for more than ten minutes) with the actress in the famous scene of "Arguing with each other in the garden" (*Huayuan xiangma*). This episode in the garden showcases Xue's characteristic performative style and the cinematic art of Cantonese film-opera crossover.²⁶ Moreover, the singing episode delivers cues that are pivotal for understanding the film's critique of appearance and reality, and of the deluded vision of the beautiful and the rich. When the couple bickers and mocks each other behind their masks (during the costume party) in the backyard, the hero implies he may well be a dandyish and handsome bachelor in disguise. The woman in return declares that she really does not care about who the man implies he is. She refuses to confess her love, a gesture showing that it takes human effort and care to vindicate true love, which has nothing to do with beauty or fortune.

For Yuniang, indeed, love is the last bastion to resist the world of deceit and desire around her. Her father, suspected of fraud and embezzlement in Shanghai, leaves for Hong Kong, where he plans to scam rich and powerful men and to marry his daughter to one of them. The costume party is important as the venue of human masquerades—it is where the father meets a "banker" who turns out to belong to a syndicate of con artists. Meanwhile, for *Platinum Dragon*, it is ironically through the act of impersonating and

putting on a false human identity that he is going to prove his true love for the heroine. So he disguises himself as a waiter at the hotel in the service of the woman in order to have an intimate relationship with her.

The games of courtship and false identity develop further when Yuniang's father finds himself unable to afford his rent at the hotel. In the American movie, the duchess soon discovers that her family and highborn relatives can no longer pay for their grand expenses. The Cantonese adaptation re-creates a similar situation, with even more compelling twists and turns. To ease his financial crisis, the father wants to pawn his daughter's diamond brooch pin—a love token given by her mother—to pay the rent. When Platinum Dragon (the waiter) notices, he helps to deposit the woman's precious article in the hotel in return for the money that Yuniang needs. Hence, the brooch pin serves as a functional cue that motivates the plot of the film. Earlier in the party scene, the "banker" observes that Yuniang puts on the diamond brooch pin and decides to befriend her father and the family. Toward the end of the film, the trickster and his criminal gang capture the woman to ask for a ransom of the diamond pin. Again, Platinum Dragon has to go through his last ordeal by cross-dressing as a woman (a familiar gender role-play for Xue Juexian, who also specialized in acting female roles as the male *dan* on stage) to negotiate with the gang and rescue his love. The ending may be flawed by an occasional dash of slapstick and farce. But when Yuniang accepts Platinum Dragon's marriage proposal for what he has done, not for who he is, the ending becomes more convincing, not as a forgone conclusion but as the film's cogent effort to humanize sexual and conjugal relationships.

My brief analysis of *The New Platinum Dragon* shed lights on the cinematic features of the first 1933 sound film, and may partially explain why Xue Juexian's new Cantonese venture held such a wide appeal for native Cantonese, if not all Chinese, audiences. Yet, despite its embrace of American and Hollywood culture, *The Platinum Dragon* was denigrated as a frivolous entertainment, an escapist fantasy of an Americanized bourgeois lifestyle, and worse still, a slavish devotion to capitalism (especially in the portrayal of the chivalrous hero). Negative commentaries appeared in the current criticism between 1933 and 1937; the film was despised for glorifying the "magic power of money" (*jinqian de moli*), whereas the Westernized Cantonese opera production was lampooned for making "senseless fuss" (*hun nao*) as a chaotically mixed stage play that was "neither Chinese nor Western" (*buzhong buxi*) and "neither contemporary nor traditional" (*feijin feigu*).²⁷ Such artistic depreciation of the Cantonese opera-film crossover, of course, recalled a similarly

simplistic rationale for the moral and political criticisms of magical-fantastic genres in 1920s Shanghai. It overlooks the Cantonese film pioneer's effort to articulate a localized vision of the modern by assimilating Hollywood in Cantonese theater and screen, and fails to understand how the "foreign" contributes to formulating Cantonese (and later Hong Kong) cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s.²⁸ As Cantonese cinema continued to flourish as a quintessentially popular entertainment mixing the foreign with the local, it increasingly became a target of political and moral criticism in the decades to come. *The Platinum Dragon* and the film's metamorphosis exemplify the fate of the cinema itself.

SUBDUING *THE PLATINUM DRAGON*: SURVIVAL OF CANTONESE-DIALECT CINEMA

The national polemics against Cantonese filmmaking continued into the 1940s when Xue Juexian remade *The New Platinum Dragon*. Just a year after Xue's new film production, an article published in the *Qingqing* movie magazine launched an abusive attack on Cantonese film circles, predicting extinction of Cantonese pictures as cheap, low-quality entertainments that contaminated the mind. The article denigrated popular Cantonese pictures as a "contagious disease that not only can eradicate the whole film community of the southern Chinese region, but even more abominably, can kill off the 'conscience' of the good people of China."²⁹

Such a forthright denunciation of the Cantonese movie industry on moral grounds indeed perpetrated the bitter tug-of-war between Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas, in which Shanghai's media had consistently picked on Cantonese talkies and slandered them as "shoddy quickies" (*cuzhi lanzaos*). The disparagement of Cantonese productions as backward and nonsensical was part of the media discourse concomitant with the national government's coercive measures to drive out Cantonese and all dialectal pictures through censorship. In 1930 the Film Censorship Committee in Nanjing issued a formal ban on all dialectal pictures in the country, with a political agenda to promote Mandarin as the national language. Nonetheless, Cantonese film companies could still enjoy a boom regardless of the announcement of the ban under the protection of a separatist provincial government in Guangdong. The national government could not reinforce the dialect film ban until 1936, when it regained control of Guangdong and other South China prov-

inces. Frantic responses were made by filmmakers and representatives of the industry from Guangdong and Hong Kong. They quickly formed an alliance and founded the South China Film Association, chaired by Runje Shaw. These representatives petitioned Nanjing and strongly opposed that hostile ban that would put Cantonese cinema in peril, as the authorities was ready to implement wholesale restrictions on Cantonese talkies in July 1937.³⁰

The process of bargaining between Guangdong and Hong Kong filmmakers, and the countermeasures and arguments proposed by the Cantonese delegates, were documented in *Yilin (Artland)*, an émigré movie magazine that had wide readerships in South China and overseas Chinese communities, in the issues between 1937 and 1939. The statutory ban was suspended with a three-year grace period until 1940, when Cantonese pictures would be gradually phased out in the mainland market. Despite the postponement of the ban, negotiations and disputes were ongoing, with strife and distrust between the two sides. Cantonese filmmakers were doubtful that Mandarin filmmakers in Shanghai had a vested interest in pushing the draconian censorship policies that would eventually expelled Cantonese talkies from the mainland market. To counter these adverse policies, the Cantonese representatives argued that because Mandarin was far from popular in South China, language unification should be implemented in phases. Some insisted that Cantonese films were popular among the local populace in South China, and so Cantonese-dialect pictures were crucial and functional in promoting the cause of science and progress for the nation.³¹ This kind of nationalistic rhetoric understandably veiled Hong Kong filmmakers' fear of losing the vast Southern China market once the ban was strictly executed. The negotiations reached such a deadlock that some Cantonese filmmakers harbored antinortherner sentiments, and some had already refused to submit their films to the government censors. Ironically, it was the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War that spoiled the mainland government's plan to impose the ban on Cantonese pictures.

The making of *The Platinum Dragon* and *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* is illustrative of the polemical and volatile transformation of 1930s Cantonese cinema, surviving the politics of the dialect film ban, on the one hand, and encountering vehement media censure of the worth and artistic merits of Cantonese pictures, on the other. The huge commercial success of *The Platinum Dragon* in 1933 spawned dozens of Cantonese film studios in the coming years to tap into the new markets, but the quality of the new films declined just when investment and production reached a fervent pitch.³² In

1934 and 1935, Runje Shaw became the target of finger-pointing by Shanghai's media and film distributors, bearing the brunt of their criticism for churning out shoddy pictures, largely the product of other Cantonese filmmakers.³³ Meanwhile, overproduction in this period led to a box-office slump for Cantonese movies. As the chairman of the South China Film Association, Shaw was committed to fighting for the legitimacy of Cantonese films, and he also voiced discontent with his fellow Cantonese filmmakers for failing to elevate the standards of Cantonese filmmaking.³⁴

One can surmise that, under these hostile attacks, Shaw must have been eager to produce good Cantonese pictures with both artistic and commercial values. It was in response to the market crisis that Shaw teamed up with Xue Juexian again to make the second part of *The Platinum Dragon* (though their partnership disintegrated during the shooting of the film). The filming of *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* was delayed by many unfavorable incidents. In 1934, Xue was brutally attacked by a Cantonese gang after a performance in Shanghai. He survived the assault, but it nearly blinded him. Film stocks were destroyed by fire three times during the filming, including two disastrous fires that broke out at the Unique studio in 1936. The crew had to reshoot the film a fourth time.³⁵ Eventually, Xue finished the film production, possibly during his longer visit to Southeast Asia (reportedly at the invitation of Run Run Shaw).³⁶ In 1935 he toured Southeast Asia to conduct research on the film industry and explore the business of doing theatrical performance there. Xue formed an itinerant theatrical troupe to tour Singapore in 1936, the same year he filmed the second part of *The Platinum Dragon*. The sequel was produced by Nanyang Studio, a company restructured by Shaw after fire destroyed the Unique Studio in 1936. Hence, in *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two*, geographical and cultural spaces in Southeast Asia prominently figured in its relationships with Shanghai and China. I shall tease out the historical and cinematic significance in the context of the film's transnational making and consumption.

The Platinum Dragon: Part Two is a romantic comedy that revolves around Platinum Dragon (Xue Juexian) and three women. The Cantonese film takes a rare look at the cutthroat business world of overseas Chinese business in Southeast Asia in connection with Shanghai. The sequel is a loose extension of the story in *The Platinum Dragon*. Platinum Dragon is now engaged with Zhang Yuniang (Tang Xueqing), and he has moved with her family to Southeast Asia to assist his future father-in-law in running his rubber manufacture company. Platinum Dragon is able to show his cali-

ber and an astute mind in administration of the company. Yet he cannot gain the favor and trust of Zhang's father, who thinks of him as "hypocritical." Platinum Dragon feels dejected after rows with Yuniang's father, which reveal the maladies of life in the Chinese upper middle class. Meanwhile, Platinum Dragon is quickly taken in by the charm and attention of Wu Mali (Mary) (Lin Meimei [Lam Mui-mui]), without knowing that she is a family member of his business rival in the rubber industry. Disguised as the romantic lover, Mary intends to seduce Platinum Dragon and talk him into investing his money in her company so as to undercut the business of the Zhang family, for which he is working. After the fiancée discovers the man's infidelity, the couple is on the verge of breaking their engagement. The crisis of their disengagement is overcome by Yuniang's sister, Yuchan (played by Huang Manli [Wong Man-lei]), who intervenes in the man's affair by using her appeal on him. Succumbing to the sister's ingenious scheme and the spell of her charms, Platinum Dragon leaves Mary and proposes marriage to Yuchan. The plot of romantic intrigues is, however, brought to a twisted ending when the bride at the marriage ceremony turns out to be Yuniang. The game of love comes full circle when Platinum Dragon and Yuniang return to where they started and to the roles they intended to play, husband and wife.

Adopting the narrative interest of Hollywood-style romantic comedies, Xue Juexian's sequel also reveals a desire to expand Cantonese talkies in the Southeast Asian market after the commercial success of his first sound film. The first shot of *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* shows a map of Southeast Asia with an animated image of a steamship sailing across the globe. This opening scene illustrates vividly the ambitions of both Xue and Unique (Nanyang) to explore the new southern markets, navigating their movie business from Shanghai via Hong Kong to Southeast Asia. The move to Southeast Asia was a strategic plan when the Cantonese film business was being censored and censured in Mainland China.

Under the veneer of film comedy lies the subtext of the lingual-cultural and transnational politics of Cantonese cinema, which started to build its base at the margins of Mainland China and yet strove to respond to the call for national progress. Thus, the amusing moral drama of family problem, male infidelity, triangular love, and marriage is subtly intertwined with the world of crafty business schemes, transnational capital flows, and a sense of saving China's industries and economy. In the latter part of the film, as Yuchan captivates Platinum Dragon with her sex appeal, she convinces him

to redirect the huge sum of money he promised to give Mary for a private investment, to donate for the cause of education for Chinese children in Nanyang (Southeast Asia). Following the finale of the happy reunion and wedding of the couple, the film ends with Platinum Dragon paying his farewell speech to the company chiefs before he returns with his wife to Shanghai. He makes a passionate speech to encourage overseas Chinese businessmen to make investments in Mainland China so as to contribute to China's national industry and economy. Produced at the time of political turmoil in 1936, Xue attempted to maintain a good balance between commercial and political interests, and demonstrated a sharp historical sensitivity in the film.³⁷ Overseas Chinese donations indeed became an important source of funding for China in the War of Resistance. And it turned out that the Southeast Asian market was congenial to the growth of the Cantonese movie industry in the coming decades.

Yet, despite the slight trace of national sentiment in the film, for the majority of Cantonese-speaking and general Chinese audiences in 1930s China, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, the popularity of Xue Juexian's sequel had much to do with the portrayal of Platinum Dragon—a high-society Chinese dandy, a profligate man of manners, a chivalrous gentleman, and above all, an object of desire for women (whom they hankered after) and men (whom they wished to become). The allure of Xue's screen presence was augmented by his stardom in Cantonese theater.³⁸ The merger of Cantonese opera and Western cinema that highlighted the performances of masquerade and role-playing, and the plots of human scheming and money swindling, contributed to its box-office success.³⁹ The film's scandalous and humorous ending—in which the man cheats on his fiancée, gets separated from her, but eventually finds himself tricked into marrying her—recalls the "comedy of remarriage" in 1930s–1940s Hollywood cinema.⁴⁰ The core of this comedy concerns the threat of separation or divorce, which spurs the couple to seek mutual understanding of their romantic liaison and to put love and gender equality back in a conjugal relationship. Along the lines of Hollywood's comic construction of the modern woman, Xue's sequel compellingly features Yuchan not so much as a seductress or social flapper but as a strong-willed and scheming woman who gains the upper hand over the man to handle the family crisis and manages to seal the couple's broken relationship with the final ritual of marriage. The film's unique way of incorporating foreign genres, visualizing new ways of modern life, and addressing changing social mores and lifestyles not only offered audiences entertaining

plots and visual spectacles, but also productively engaged with issues of cinematic modernity, gender, intermedia performance, and spectatorship as a form of urban entertainment—an artistic experiment that was undertaken ahead of its time.

CODA: CIRCUITS OF EARLY CANTONESE CINEMA

The rise and fall of *The Platinum Dragon* exemplified early Cantonese-language cinema in its dynamic interactions within the larger map of Chinese-language cinemas and the transnational connections between Hong Kong, Guangdong and South China, Shanghai, Southeast Asia, and Hollywood. With the advent of sound film technology in the 1930s, the Hong Kong–Guangdong region emerged as the largest production center of Cantonese talkies, exporting its product not only to Cantonese-speaking communities in South China, but also to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America. The assimilation of Cantonese opera performance in talking pictures with the popularization of gramophone records created a vibrant commercial cinema with lucrative profits. The emergence of Cantonese-speaking pictures and the dialect movie industry led to political and cultural contradictions when the ideology of state-building with rising nationalist discourse and censorship practice got in the way of movie-making and consumption, with complex political, commercial, and cultural implications. In its rivalry with Shanghai-based Mandarin films for market share and cultural supremacy, Cantonese cinema was inevitably engaged in cultural politics on local, national, and transnational levels. Cantonese filmmakers were always torn between political alignment with the nation and pursuit of commercial interest and entertainment value.

Xue Juexian's cinematic series of *The Platinum Dragon* was emblematic of Cantonese cinema's effort to respond to the political imperative of the nation and regionally commercial interest in the volatile 1930s. By blending the art of Hollywood romantic comedy with a Westernized form of Cantonese opera, Xue also made ingenious efforts to modernize Cantonese cinema by rejecting the highly popular genres of martial arts and magic spirit films prevalent in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Whereas Xue's theater and cinema were significantly based in the transregional networks of Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong, his Cantonese films indeed smacked of "Shanghai styles" (*haipai*) in assimilating foreign cultural imports and projecting mod-

ern lifestyle. But Xue's idiosyncratic creative flair and his market sense as the pioneer of Cantonese (Chinese) cinema was soon forgotten, if not entirely erased from historiography and cinematic memory (dozens of his films are no longer extant)⁴¹ when Cantonese cinema was submerged in discourse of the "national defense cinema" (*guofang dianying*), followed by a number of "cleansing movements" (*qingjie yundong*) of Cantonese films in the late 1930s and 1940s. *The Platinum Dragon*, as a popular and intricate romance and a modernist blending of Cantonese theater and Western cinema, would surely have offended moralistic and political critics at that time and thereafter.⁴²

With a renewed focus on Chinese-language cinemas as comprising pluralistic linguistic registers and diversified regional traditions in recent studies of Chinese cinema, this preliminary examination of *The Platinum Dragon* and Xue Juexian's early cinematic venture begins to address unresolved questions in the field of Cantonese cinema historiography and aesthetics. The case of *The Platinum Dragon* and the early Cantonese filmic tradition it represents bespeak the presence of dialects, accents, and music, disputing the uniformity and commonality of national identity in cinematic history. *The Platinum Dragon* created a new genre of the musical film, and the dynamic blending of opera and cinema in various degrees would be sustained well into the 1960s. Xue's successful move between theater and cinema also hastened the crossing over of opera artists and screen stars, which consolidated a distinctively Cantonese performance culture in Hong Kong. On the other hand, it is worth further studying the Hong Kong–Shanghai connections in the formation of early Cantonese cinema, as seen in Xue's embrace of Hollywood's global appeal and his creation of a dandyish gentleman in *The Platinum Dragon*.⁴³ The recent rediscovery of early Cantonese film texts provides the impetus for a transregional inquiry into the sound, dialect, and cultural politics of Cantonese film culture and the close ties between Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Southeast Asia.

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Notes

1. "Xue Juexian chongpai *Xu Baijinlong*: Xiwang ta xian cha yi cha jiancha ling" [Xue Juexian Remakes *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two*: He Better Check the Censorship Order Beforehand], *Ying yu xi* 1, no. 4 (1936): 6.
2. "Xue Juexian zai Xianggang zuzhi gongsi: Pai yueyu shengpian busong Nanjing jiancha" [Xue Juexian Has Established His Own Company in Hong Kong to Make Sound Films, Which He Will Not Submit to Nanjing for Inspection], *Yule* 1 (Inauguration issue) (1935): 25.
3. See Zhiwei Xiao, "Constructing a New National Culture: Film Censorship and the Issues of Cantonese Dialect, Superstition, and Sex in the Nanjing Decade," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183–99; Wang Chaoguang, *Yingyi de zhengzhi: Minguo dianying jiancha zhidu yanjiu* [The Politics of Film Art: A Study of the Institution of Film Censorship in the Republican Era] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2013).
4. More than a dozen Hong Kong films from the 1930s and 1940s were discovered in San Francisco in 2012. After repair work and technical preservation, the Hong Kong Film Archive screened eight of the early Cantonese film productions in early 2015, including *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two*.
5. Yu Mo-wan, "Xianggang yueju dianying fazhan shihua" [Words on the History of Development of the Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Film], in *The 11th Hong Kong Film Festival: Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1987), 18–21.
6. Kevin Latham, "Consuming Fantasies: Mediated Stardom in Hong Kong Cantonese Opera and Cinema," *Modern China* 26, no. 3 (2000): 329–30.
7. Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* was so popular among Cantonese filmmakers that there were two more remakes of the Hollywood comedy by veteran Cantonese film director Zuo Ji (Tso Kea, 1916–1997) in 1957 and 1958, known as *My Kingdom for a Husband* (1957) and *My Kingdom for a Honeymoon* (1958), and both retained the Chinese title *Xuangong yanshi*. For a study of the remakes, see Yiman Wang, "The Love Parade Goes On: 'Western-Costume Cantonese Opera Film' and the Foreignizing Remake," in *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 82–112.
8. For a cultural history of gramophone records and radio broadcasting in Hong Kong and Guangdong, see Yung Sai-shing, *Yueyun Liusheng: Changpian gongye yu Guangdong quyiyi 1903–1953* [Recording Cantonese Tunes: The Gramophone Industry and Cantonese Folk Arts, 1903–1953] (Hong Kong: Cosmic Books, 2006).
9. For a study of the modernization of Cantonese opera and its transnational circuits in the 1920s and 1930s, see Yung Sai-shing, *Xunmi Yueju shengying: Cong Hongchuan*

dao Shuiyindeng [Tracing Cantonese Opera: From Red Boat to Silver Light] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10. Yiman Wang, "The 'Transnational' as Methodology: Transnationalizing Chinese Film Studies through the Example of *The Love Parade* and Its Chinese Remakes," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 1 (2008): 10.

11. Wang, "The Love Parade Goes On," 83.

12. As May-bo Ching points out, there had been close commercial and cultural interconnections between Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Hong Kong since the early twentieth century. Whereas Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta hinterland exported commercial talents with rich experience in Sino-foreign trade, Shanghai congregated human, material, and technological resources from the country and abroad. Hong Kong served as a stable and secure haven for trading against the political turmoil occurring in the Mainland. See May-bo Ching, "Where Guangdong Meets Shanghai: Hong Kong Culture in a Trans-regional Context," in *Hong Kong Mobile: Making a Global Population*, ed. Helen F. Siu and Agnes S. Ku (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 45–62.

13. According to Pui-tak Lee in his study of the interflow of Guangdong and Shanghai film culture in the 1930s, Cantonese filmmakers had been rather active in Shanghai cinema, taking up positions from studio owners, theater owners, film distributors and dealers to directors, actors, technicians, and musicians. See Pui-tak Lee, "To Ban and Counter Ban: Cantonese Cinema Caught between Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1930s," in *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection*, ed. Ain-ling Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005), 30–49. Lee also estimates that there were about three hundred thousand Guangdong natives in Shanghai in 1930; see Lee, 32.

14. Lee, "To Ban and Counter Ban," 35.

15. Chengren Zhou, "Shanghai's Unique Film Productions and Hong Kong's Early Cinema," in *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, ed. Ain-ling Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003), 33.

16. Liu Zhenggang, *Huashuo Yueshang* [On Cantonese merchants] (Beijing: Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 2008), 151–54.

17. Lee, "To Ban and Counter Ban," 35.

18. Christopher Rea, "Enter the Cultural Entrepreneur," in *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia, 1900–65*, ed. Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 10.

19. Wing-chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 72.

20. In spring 1938, Xue Juexian wrote about his opera dream in *Yilin* (*Artland*). Quoted from Cui Songming, ed., *Tushuo Xue Juexian yishu rensheng* [Pictorial Illustration of Xue Juexian's Artistic Life] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Bahe huiguan, 2013), 92.

21. Gang violence was prevalent in the world of Cantonese theaters and business in the 1920s and 1930s. See Ng, *Rise of Cantonese Opera*, 26.

22. The movie was adapted from Xue Juexian's Cantonese opera with the same title, in

which he played the main character, with Tang Xueqing in the female leading role. Tang was born to a senior office member's family, a well-off household with reputation and fame. Her grandfather was one of the brothers of Tang Shaoyi (1863–1938) who served as ministers and ambassadors in the Qing dynasty and later became the first prime minister of the Republic of China. Xue hired her as the female lead in the movie after many twists and turns. Xue and Tang finally got married.

23. In 1931, Xue Juexian moved back to Shanghai. He then ran the Nanfang Movie Production Company and filmed *The Platinum Dragon* in 1933. The late 1920s saw the epic collapse of the Cantonese opera business in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. See Ng, *Rise of Cantonese Opera*, 56–77.

24. For a discussion of *The Platinum Dragon's* potential impact on early Cantonese cinema, see Zhou, "Shanghai's Unique Film Productions," 80–84. Hong Kong film historian Yu Mo-wan believes that the success of *The Platinum Dragon* was crucial for the rise of Cantonese cinema in the 1930s, as well as for Shaw to establish a firm market base in Southeast Asia. See Yu Mo-wan, "Xue Juexian yu dianying" [Xue Juexian and Cinema], in *Zhen shan mei: Xue Juexian yishu rensheng* [The Authentic, the Good, and the Beautiful: Xue Juexian's Artistic Life], ed. Guangdong Bihe huiguan and the Hong Kong University Art Museum (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Art Museum, 2009), 70–74.

25. Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 123.

26. Victor Fan gives a detailed cinematic analysis of this singing scene in the garden in *The New Platinum Dragon*. See Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 178–86.

27. Li Yi, "Xue Juexian yu yueju Baijinlong" [Xue Juexian and Cantonese Opera *The Platinum Dragon*], *Nanguo hongdou* 3 (2009): 16–19. Quoted from Li, 17.

28. Wang, "The Love Parade Goes On," 83.

29. "Yueyupian jiangqu juejing" [Cantonese Films Soon to Be Extinct], *Qingqing Di-anything* 32 (1948): n.p.

30. For a detailed account of the censorship of Cantonese film in the 1930s, see Lee, "To Ban and Counter Ban," 30–49, esp. 41–44; Stephanie Po-yin Chung, "A Tale of Two Cinemas: Prewar Tug-of-War between North and South," in Wong, *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection*, 50–67. Also see Stephen Teo, "The Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema: Emergence, Development and Decline," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, ed. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (London: British Film Institute, 2011), 103–110.

31. See, for example, Ji Chen, "Guanyu jinying yueyupian zhi mianmianguan" [A Look at the Ban on Cantonese Films in Different Aspects], *Yilin* 3 (1937): n.p.

32. According to Zhou Chengren's survey, there were only three film production companies in Hong Kong in 1933. In 1936, there were twenty-five companies—eight times as many. In 1933, only five films were produced. The output surged to forty-nine films in 1936. Zhou, "Shanghai's Unique Film Productions," 33.

33. See Zhi Qing, "Tianyi gongsi de yueyu yousheng pian wenti" [Questions Concerning Tianyi's Cantonese Sound Films], *Diansheng zhoukan* 3, no. 17 (1934): n.p.; "Yueyu shengpian kaishi moluo, Shao Zuiweng deng dashou shenchi" [Cantonese Films in Decline: Shao Zuiweng Gets Reprimanded], *Yule* 1, no. 24 (1935): 593.

34. Chung, "Tale of Two Cinemas," 42.

35. Yu, "Xue Juexian yu dianying," 71.

36. Ng, *Rise of Cantonese Opera*, 72.

37. A nationalist message was put in the film's advertisement in *Zhongshan ribao* (June 15, 1937) in Guangzhou, which read: "Qingchang li: Fazhan gongyi! Gequ zhong: Tichang shiye" [Develop Arts and Crafts in Love. Advocate Manufacturing Industries in Songs]. Quoted from May Gwan-yuk Ng: "Xu Baijinlong de qingchang, shangchang, yangchang" [The Love Battlefield, Business World and Foreign Influence in *The White Gold Dragon*, Part Two], in *Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered*, ed. Winne Fu and May Gwan-yuk Ng (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2015, exhibition program brochure), 33.

38. For an analysis of stardom in Cantonese theater and performance culture, see Latham, "Consuming Fantasies."

39. According to Yu Mo-wan, *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two* was the top-grossing film in Guangzhou in 1937. The film had a continuous run of fifteen days with full-house attendance. See Yu, "Xue Juexian yu dianying," 71.

40. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

41. According to Yu Mo-wan, Xue Juexian had thirty-five films to his credit. He was most likely the first Chinese opera actor who successfully turned to filmmaking when he made *The Shameless Girl* in 1926. See Yu, "Xue Juexian yu dianying," 70–73.

42. *The Platinum Dragon* continued to receive political criticisms because the "Western-costume Cantonese opera" embraced Americanization and Western comprador capitalism, and the play's mixture of Chinese and Western elements was deemed vulgar, frivolous, and pornographic, as the story contained elements of robbery, adventure, hooliganism, adultery, and sexual immorality. See Li, "Xue Juexian yu yueju Baijinlong," 17.

43. For the global appeal of Hollywood, see Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 332–350.