Between the national and the transnational: Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko and pan-Asianism

Li Xianglan, nicknamed ‘the Manchurian orchid’, was actually a Japanese actress named Yamaguchi Yoshiko, who had several names at different stages in her life. Her shape-shifting names are symptomatic and constitutive of her legendary and controversial life shaped by her tumultuous times: here I examine Yamaguchi/Li’s wartime double identity as a Japanese national born and raised in 1920s northeast China and a Chinese starring in a number of Japanese films, as well as her postwar ‘afterlife’.

Encore Li Xianglan

Li’s political and entertainment value underwent further re-signification during the 1980s and 90s, when her wartime love songs were re-released as part of the nostalgic reconstruction of pre-1945 Republican Shanghai that swept post-socialist China and post-colonial Hong Kong alike. Two major works rehearsed Li’s legendary life: the musical Li Xianglan and the four-episode TV show Sayonara Ri Ko-ran (Breath, Li Xianglan), both appearing in the early 1990s and adapted from her autobiography. The Japanese musical was staged fifteen times in Beijing, Changchun, Shenyang, and Dalian to a Chinese audience of twenty thousand. The musical attributed Li’s repatriation not simply to her Japanese nationality, but to the Oriental virtue of repaying hatred with benevolence (Yide baoyuan), the same virtue said to underlie the restorations of the Sino-Japanese diplomatic relationship.

Deviating from the political gloss, the China-Japan co-produced TV show Sayonara Ri Ko-ran ends in a most ironic moment: the Japanese ship is slowly pulling away from Shanghai with Li and other repatriated Japanese on board, when Li’s famous song ‘Yelai xiang’ (Night fragrance) is aired by the Shanghai People’s Radio Station. Sweared by her own voice, an emotional Li bids farewell to China and to ‘yey Li Xianglan’. The title ‘Sayonara Ri Ko-ran’ thus shifts from the Chinese audience’s perspective (bidding farewell to one of its favorite wartime stars) to hers (bidding farewell to her now forlorn self). The reversible change from past glory to present guilt and humiliation, from Li Xianglan to Yamaguchi Yoshiko, however, is compromised by the persistence of her singing that supposedly belongs to the past. The return of her voice uncannily suggests her omnipresence in ordinary Chinese urbanites’ lives—so much so that the disavowal of her complicity is hardly sufficient to dispel her ‘cultural capital’.

My analysis demonstrates that Li’s transnational mobility ultimately hinges upon the national divide. Given her built-in dual identity and the historical moment when she began her singing and acting career, Li served and continues to serve as a privileged embodiment of national politics as well as transnational fantasy. With trans-nationalism and globalization becoming our contemporary catchphrases, national politics that ultimately weighed down Li’s transnational mobility are, perhaps, escaping our radar. My goal, therefore, is to reassess the role national politics plays in both producing and containing trans-nationality—a dialectic Li has lived out her entire life.

Works cited

Yiming Wang is currently a Global Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor at International Institute, UCLA. Her research and teaching interests include early cinema, transnational Chinese cinemas, and film remakes.

Yiming Wang