Chinese dialect opera among the twentieth century Southeast Asian diaspora

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From the early twentieth century, Chinese dialect opera troupes followed the movement of Chinese immigrants to the various ports and cities of Southeast Asia, a region that was oftentimes referred to by the Chinese as ‘the South Seas’ [Nanyang 南洋]. The travelling of the Teochew opera (the dialect opera mostly patronised by Teochew immigrants in Bangkok, Malaya and Singapore) and its films, from hometown Shantou to the Teochew diaspora in Southeast Asia, reveals the dynamics of Sino-Southeast Asian interactions, channelled through long-existing native-place ties. In the Cold War era, Teochew opera practitioners endeavoured to maintain their old native-place ties by designing new routes of travelling in order to circumvent tensions that had made Sino-Southeast Asian interactions almost impossible. However, in the ensuing period of nation building, Teochew opera faced more difficult struggles in choosing between the ‘national’ and the ‘diasporic’, because of its ‘unwelcome’ historical linkages with homeland China.

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Notes
1 Cheoshan 朝鮮 is the contraction of the names of its two administrative areas, Chosen 南韩 and Chosun 朝鮮. It is a region defined by the culture and linguistic uniqueness in the eastern part of the Korean Peninsula, incorporating the main cities: Shantou 潮州, Cheoshan 朝鮮, Chosun 朝鮮 and Chosen 南韩.
2 'Su Li Ninang 苏六娘' and 'Yingchun 乳燕迎春' were produced by New Union in 1960. In 1951, New Union continued with ‘Gao Qinfu 高勤夫’, ‘Yingchun 乳燕迎春’, ‘Shansheng 許生’ and ‘Shanzhang 善长’ - the first Teochew opera college in Shantou. ‘Su Li Ninang 苏六娘’ and ‘Yingchun 乳燕迎春’ were produced in the origin of the Teochew dialect that is mostly spoken by native populations of Cheoshan and southeastern Chinese in the mainland, Singapore and Malaysia.
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