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Inter-City Cinematic Networks in Cold War Global History: A Reinterpretation of Chinese-Language Film Circulation Between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh, 1950s–1970s

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Abstract: This article examines the circulation of Chinese-language films between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh from the 1950s to the 1970s, situating it within the dual analytical frameworks of Cold War global history and inter-city cinematic networks to reassess the cultural circulation mechanisms generated by these two cities through the interweaving of diaspora communities, markets, and ideological forces. First, the article demonstrates how Hong Kong films entered Phnom Penh's Chinese communities through diasporic networks, exhibition circuits, and Cold War political contexts. Cantonese opera films and leftist productions were reinterpreted locally, becoming key media through which emotional bonds were sustained and political imaginations were projected. Second, the article foregrounds Phnom Penh's agency, arguing that it was not merely a passive recipient of cultural imports but an active node that, through local production, cross-border collaboration, and market feedback, exerted reverse influence on Hong Kong and neighboring regional film industries. Based on this historical process, the article proposes an analytical model of cross-city image circulation, suggesting that cities constitute crucial units for understanding the circulation of Chinese-language films during the Cold War, and demonstrating how Hong Kong and Phnom Penh formed an interconnected system that transcends the conventional "center–periphery" paradigm. By moving beyond the nation-centered framework of film historiography, this study highlights the composite roles of urban actors, diasporic structures, and political forces in Cold War-era cinematic flows, offering new theoretical insights for the transnational history of Chinese-language cinema.

Keywords: Cold War global history; Cross-city image networks; Chinese-language film circulation; Diasporic networks

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In recent years, the convergence of international history and film studies has brought the analytical framework of Cold War global history increasingly to the fore. Representative works such as *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* and *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* have gradually moved away from traditional nation-centered narratives, conceptualizing the Cold War as a global structure of interactions whose driving forces were deeply rooted in transnational flows, cultural networks, and the agency of non-state actors (Chen, 2015). This paradigmatic shift has opened new pathways for reinterpreting the cultural histories of East and Southeast Asia—allowing previously marginalized entities, such as Chinese diasporic communities, urban film industries, and cross-regional audiences, to re-enter the center of historical analysis.

Meanwhile, film studies has undergone a parallel "global turn." Classical frameworks of "world film history" have been critically reexamined (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009), while renewed attention to Asian, African, and Latin American "non-Western film traditions" has pushed transnational image circulation, industrial networks, and diasporic cultural transmission to the forefront of global film historiogra-

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phy (Nowell-Smith, 1996). Within this intellectual trajectory, studies of Chinese-language cinema have increasingly moved beyond the conventional paradigm of "national cinema," shifting instead toward the cultural meanings and practical logics generated through cross-regional, cross-city, and cross-ethnic interactions (Li, 2014).

Situated at the intersection of these two scholarly currents, the present study positions its examination of Hong Kong–Phnom Penh Chinese-language film circulation. Although located within different political systems during the Cold War, Hong Kong and Phnom Penh formed a dynamic and sustained network of image circulation through diasporic connections, market linkages, and ideological entanglements. This article seeks to uncover the inner mechanisms of this interconnected system at the margins and to explore how cities, as cultural nodes, shaped film networks that transcended national borders within the broader global structure of the Cold War.

From Hong Kong to Phnom Penh: Intercity Ideological Flows and Reinterpretations

Most Chinese migrants in Cambodia trace their ancestral origins to Guangdong, Hainan, and Fujian, with Teochew migrants constituting the majority—approximately 80 percent of the overall Chinese Cambodian population—followed by Hakka migrants (State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Cadre School, 2005). Concentrated in commercial districts such as O'Russei Market and New Market, these communities were further organized into associations based on dialect and place of origin, including the Teochew, Cantonese, Fujianese, and Hainanese. Owing to relatively recent settlement histories, control over commercial networks, restrictions embedded in Cambodian naturalization policies, and the persistence of native-place consciousness, Chinese in Phnom Penh generally maintained cultural practices tied to their homelands, making them a natural audience for Sinitic-language cinema.

Lin (2018) mentions that Minbao Evening News (Shantou Edition) on February 10, 1939, reported that Teochew opera troupes, such as the "Old Yuchunxiang Troupe" and the "Zhongyizhixiang Troupe," had established regular performance circuits in the 1920s. In the late 1950s, the China Teochew Opera Troupe, led by Wang Kunlun and Qi Feng, embarked on a cultural exchange tour to Cambodia, generating significant excitement in Phnom Penh. Lai (1993) notes that over the course of forty-two days, the troupe attracted more than sixty thousand spectators, staging full-length operas such as *Chen San & Wu-Niang*（《陈三五娘》） and *Su Liu-Niang*（《苏六娘》）, as well as classic excerpts like *Lu-lin Hui*（《芦林会》） and *Sao-chuang Hui*（《扫窗会》）. The tour received extensive media coverage, with four major local Chinese-language newspapers—*Mianhua Daily*, *Kung Sheung Daily*, *Meijiang Daily*, and *Life Daily*—publishing more than fifty reports and commentaries, accompanied by over 240 production stills.The Voice of Cambodia radio highlighted the troupe's success, describing Teochew opera as "one of the oldest and finest traditional genres" (Lai, 1993, p. 237).

The tour began with a special performance at the Fuchani Palace for Queen Sisowath Kosamak and her royal family. Lai (1993) records that the Queen expressed her appreciation, saying, "This is the first time a visiting troupe has used Khmer subtitles. Thank you for your thoughtful preparation". Despite the theatre's limited capacity of just over eight hundred seats, to meet the overwhelming demand, five to six hundred standing-room tickets were sold each night, and thousands of spectators gathered outside to listen to live broadcasts. The final performance was held on a temporary stage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs square, free to the public, where tens of thousands of residents gathered, filling both the stage and surrounding streets.

In May 1960, Troupe One of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre performed publicly for the first time in Hong Kong, showcasing productions such as *Ci-lang Zhou*（《辞郎洲》）, *Li-jing Ji*（《荔镜记》）, and *Su Liu-niang*, which sparked the "Yao Xuanqiu phenomenon."According to Lai (2021), the troupe premiered *Dang-Ma*（《挡马》） and *Ci-lang Zhou* at the Ko Shing Theatre on June 10, captivating the audience with continuous applause (Huang, 2021, p. 149). After the performance, more than 1,000 people crowded outside the theatre, waiting to catch a glimpse of the performers, as reported by *Southern Daily* (1960). Xu (2005) describes that when the troupe performed at the Pou Hing Theatre in Kowloon, a typhoon struck Hong Kong, yet the ticket queue stretched from Nathan Road to Gascoigne Road. As the troupe moved to the Ko Shing Theatre, the crowd grew even larger, with overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia flying in, some paying 150 Hong Kong dollars for black-market tickets—twelve times the regular price—to see the performance.

During this period, Hong Kong—then the most important Chinese-language film production center outside mainland China—developed an export-oriented mechanism for cultural circulation within Southeast Asian migrant communities in the Cold War geopolitical context. According to Pu (2010), in the 1950s, many films circulating in Thailand as "Teochew films" were actually Hokkien-language films dubbed into Teochew. In contrast, locally produced "authentic Teochew films" in Hong Kong featured primarily spoken-drama performances with only a few Teochew arias, rather than full opera-style staging. However, by 1960, *Kung Sheung Evening Post* reported that audiences "increasingly long for fully theatricalized singing performances" (Pu, 2010). Even before the Guangdong troupe's 1960 visit, Hong Kong's film industry began experimenting with opera-style Teochew cinema. In February 1960, Donghai Film Company initiated the production of *A Pair of Carved Jade*（《刘明珠三审玉芝兰》）, marketed as a "Teochew opera stage film," marking a key step in the operatic transformation of Hong Kong's Teochew-language cinema.

The surge in Teochew opera films was sustained by a stable diasporic audience and low production costs. According

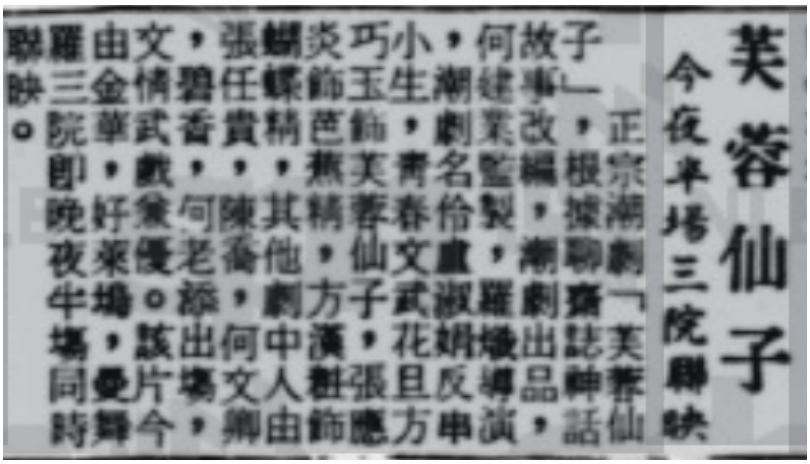

Figure 1 | Tonight's Joint Screening of Hibiscus Fairy at Three Theatres

Note. From "芙蓉仙子今夜半場三院聯映" 1964, Nanyang Siang Pau, November 28.

to Zhong (2007), Teochew films, as a dialect cinema, enjoyed a steady market within Teochew diasporic communities. With low production costs, the influx of overseas capital naturally pushed up distribution prices. Local opera troupes provided ready-made scripts, songs, performers, and musicians, making Teochew film production relatively risk-free for Hong Kong producers who managed their budgets carefully.

Key productions from 1960 to 1965, such as *Su Liu-niang* and *Chen San & Wu-Niang*, both starring Yao Xuanqiu, were known for their refined production values and vivid color cinematography. These films also exemplified a triangular geography of film history linking Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. *Su Liu-niang* was co-produced by Hong Kong's Hongtu Film Company and the First Troupe of Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre, with filming at the Pearl River Film Studio in Guangzhou, while *Chen San & Wu-Niang* was produced by Dapeng Film Company in partnership with the same troupe and filmed in Guangzhou. The creative team included opera directors Zheng Yibiao（郑一标） and Wu Feng（吴峰）, and the renowned film director Zhu Shilin (朱石麟), who, having moved to Hong Kong in 1946, became a central figure in the Hong Kong film industry during the 1950s–60s; his daughter recalls, "As long as the film was directed by Zhu, Southeast Asia would purchase the demo reel in advance" (Li, 2010).

Ding (2015) observes that many opera films of the era claimed to be Hong Kong co-productions merely to secure distribution rights there, producing what she terms nominal co-productions during the Seventeen Years period. *Su Liu-niang* and *Chen San & Wu-Niang* were important exceptions—genuine cross-regional collaborations whose production practices linked disparate locations, reconfigured senses of belonging, and mobilized travelling troupes that traversed linguistic, political, regional, and ideological boundaries. These entangled histories demonstrate that mainland Chinese film history and Hong Kong film history during the Cold War can no longer be examined in isolation.

The Cold War ideological divide endowed such cultural circulation with even greater significance. Because these eight co-produced Teochew films surpassed independently produced Hong Kong Teochew films in sophistication and popularity, promoters frequently used the label "mainland standards" (大陆水准) as a marketing slogan. For example, a December advertisement for The Lotus Fairy highlighted: "Authentic Teochew opera The Lotus Fairy, adapted from a Strange Tales narrative…". Another headline announced, "芙蓉仙子今夜半場三院聯映" ("Tonight's joint screening of *Hibiscus Fairy* at three theatres"; see **Figure 1**). The Guangdong troupe's 1960 tour—marking the first post-1949 public performance of Teochew opera in Hong Kong—generated a cultural phenomenon described as "no conversation without Teochew opera, no sound without Teochew melody" (Lin, 2019). This successful cultural exchange not only showcased the aesthetic power of Teochew opera but also helped cultivate a crucial audience base and market atmosphere for the subsequent rise of Teochew-language cinema.

Teochew opera films were linguistically limited, with audiences primarily confined to Teochew-speaking communities. Due to political and historical constraints, these films struggled to circulate in the Chaoshan region of mainland China, and with Teochew residents making up only about 20 percent of Hong Kong's population, the domestic market was small. As a result, Teochew diaspora communities across Southeast Asia became the primary audience and profit base for Hong Kong's Teochew-language cinema. Zhong (2013) explains the commercial logic: "Teochew-language films enjoyed a stable market among overseas Teochew communities. With low production costs and overseas capital flowing into Hong Kong, demand easily drove up selling prices. Local opera troupes provided scripts, songs, performers, and musicians, making production effortless and risk-free for producers who managed costs carefully." This structure allowed Hong Kong's Teochew cinema to form a cross-regional cultural circuit, linking diaspora demand, box-office revenue, and capital feedback, which sus-

tained its economic foundation. It not only secured more screenings in Southeast Asia than in Hong Kong, but also shaped film themes, narratives, and star systems, producing a cinema that was diasporic, transnational, and ethnically marked within the broader Hong Kong film industry.

The Agency of Phnom Penh's Film Industry and Its Cross-Regional Participation

In contrast to Hong Kong, Phnom Penh between the 1950s and 1970s exhibited an urban cultural landscape deeply shaped by its Chinese communities, as noted by Li (2010). While Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk officially pursued a policy of neutral diplomacy, the capital's cultural ecology clearly reflected the long-standing presence of Chinese settlers. Historical records indicate that Chinese settlers were involved in agricultural production in Cambodia as early as the sixteenth century. The *Gazetteer of Jiading: Geography Section*（《嘉定通志·山川志》） describes the southeastern regions, where "farmlands were abundant, and Chinese settlers cultivated the land alongside local inhabitants" (Chen, 1990, p.541), highlighting the long history of shared settlement and development.

The formation of Cambodia's Chinese society was the result of a complex historical process. As Bussell (1958) observes, prior to World War II, Chinese migrants—including those of Fujianese origin—were primarily involved in agriculture, fishing, and commerce. In the fishing industry in particular, "Chinese occupied an important position; before Cambodia became a French protectorate, Cambodian kings often leased fishing rights to Chinese." Such deep economic participation enabled Chinese communities to establish a strong foothold in local society. In central Phnom Penh, especially around the Central Market area, Chinese-operated shops, schools, theaters, and temples formed a dense cultural ecosystem. These dialect-based cultural choices reflected the intricate territorial and linguistic identities within the diaspora. Collective film-viewing activities organized by clan associations and schools, along with the ubiquity of Chinese-language film posters across the city, constituted a distinctive cultural landscape. Phnom Penh's Chinese-language film market was thus not a passive recipient of external culture, but rather an outward manifestation of the diaspora's internal cultural logic. As Li(2010) argues, Chinese communities actively constructed an autonomous cultural sphere in Phnom Penh through sustained cultural practices.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, Phnom Penh maintained close ties with Hong Kong's film industry, with over a dozen major cinemas, most of which were Chinese-owned. Liang and Chen (1997) note that Cambodia accounted for 12.4% of Hong Kong's overseas film revenue during this period, underlining the city's reliance on Hong Kong for its film supply. According to Kang (2023), some theaters in Phnom Penh were even directly linked to Hong Kong companies through capital networks. This resulted in the development of a stable channel for the distribution of Hong Kong cinema. While the Cambodian government promoted Khmer nationalism, Chinese cultural expression was generally tolerated, with censorship mainly targeting political content. Consequently, Hong Kong films were able to cross geographical and cultural boundaries, building a strong distribution network throughout Southeast Asia. Phnom Penh thus emerged as a city that was culturally open yet politically vigilant, where Chinese-language cinema existed as a semi-autonomous sphere within the local sociopolitical framework, balancing relations with the royal government.

To understand the flow of images between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh, it is essential to view the diaspora community as a form of cross-regional cultural infrastructure. Under Cold War conditions, Hong Kong became a central hub for the circulation of Chinese-language films. For instance, Xu (2005) explains that a major business of Nanfang Film Company involved purchasing films or investing in productions for overseas Chinese theaters and distributors. Its distribution network spanned Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaya, Singapore, and Thailand, relying on shared ethnic ties, as well as on commercial collaboration, capital circulation, and information exchange.

Commercial capital and industrial-chain integration formed the basis of film circulation. As markets expanded, theaters operating only at the exhibition end could no longer meet demand, making it "urgent for them to intervene in the upstream stages of film production" (Zhang, 2017). Guangyi Film Company traveled to Hong Kong to produce Cantonese films precisely because "producing directly in Hong Kong was more cost-effective." According to the recollections of director Chu Yuan（楚原）, then employed by Guangyi, "a budget of only 160,000 Singapore dollars was sufficient to break local box-office records," and the 330,000 Singapore dollar gross of *Liu Sanjie* (1960;《刘三姐》) was a sensation, leading Malayan and Singaporean distributors to conclude that "investing in Hong Kong productions was more profitable; with production costs as low as 30,000–40,000 dollars, films could earn revenue both in Hong Kong and in Singapore/Malaya markets" (Xu, 2005).

Meanwhile, diaspora media and educational institutions provided cultural support for film circulation. Chinese-language newspapers regularly published advertisements, celebrity news, and serialized film narratives, while Chinese schools' group-viewing events enhanced film visibility. Shared linguistic repertoires—Mandarin, Cantonese, and Teochew—served not only symbolic but also functional communicative purposes, forming the basis for film consumption. Finally, cinema served as a medium through which diasporic subjects sustained cultural identities and emotional ties to their ancestral homes. The modern urban imaginaries portrayed in these films often functioned as affective symbols of "the homeland." As such, diaspora communities were not merely consumers of cinema but active agents whose investment, media activity, and cultural prac-

Figure 2 | An Inseparable Bond with Snakes: Dy Saveth Has a Secret

Note. From "與蛇結不解緣 李莎月有秘密" 1974, Kung Sheung Evening Post, November 28.

tices continually drove the emotional and structural forces underpinning cross-city image circulation.

It is important to emphasize that the Chinese diaspora was not a passive cultural receiver; rather, it actively reshaped the circulation and interpretation of Hong Kong films through processes of selective appropriation and cultural reproduction. Cinema functioned not only as a medium of identity formation but also as a catalyst for new cross-cultural affective structures. From the perspective of global cultural networks, interactions between dominant media cities and weaker cities often exhibit a "media capital siphoning effect," in which the former absorbs cultural resources from the latter and integrates them into its own popular cultural system (Curtin, 2003). This dynamic was particularly evident in the cinematic exchanges between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh.

By the 1970s, some Sino-Cambodian film practitioners began to experiment with film festivals, co-productions, and other strategies to project Cambodian cinema toward the Hong Kong-centered Sinitic film market. A representative figure is Kuang Hui(许强), whose cross-cultural background—his father was a Chinese Communist underground member active in Indochina's leftist press and education sectors, while his mother belonged to the Cambodian aristocracy—allowed him to cultivate extensive networks within local political and commercial circles and to build close ties with the Hong Kong and Taiwan film industries. In 1970, under his initiative, *The Snake King's Wife*(1970; 《人蛇恋》), starring Cambodian megastar Dy Saveth（李莎月）, won six awards at the Singapore International Film Festival (**Figure 4**). The film became a landmark of Cambodia's cinematic "golden age," and Dy Saveth emerged as "one of the most beloved actresses of Cambodian cinema in the 1960s" (Bangkok Post, 2012).

This process of cultural re-inscription was far from a purely commercial phenomenon; rather, it was deeply embedded in the geopolitical configuration of Cold War Southeast Asia. Under the physical and informational barriers produced by ideological confrontation, Hong Kong and Singapore viewed Cambodia—whose political orientation diverged sharply from their own—with both caution and fascination. The media's construction of Dy Saveth's persona can be seen as a projection of these ambivalent sentiments. Hong Kong newspapers portrayed the actress as a "wild" woman capable of communicating with snakes or even forming emotional bonds with them—an image amplified in sensationalist reportage. As *Kung Sheung Evening Post* wrote on 5 February 1974, Dy Saveth had "formed an inseparable bond with snakes," and rumors surrounding the film *Snake Girl* (1974) "broke box-office records across Singapore and Malaysia," with speculation that she might visit Hong Kong. The report further suggested that "the secret she keeps can only be understood by herself; but unfortunately, paper cannot contain fire, and the truth has now been exposed." (**Figure 2**)

This "othering" narrative mechanism, co-constructed by media and cinema, profoundly reflects the asymmetric operation of cultural power under the Cold War configuration. Examining this process from the perspective of cultural production reveals dual structural characteristics: First, when local cultural symbols enter transnational commercial systems, they inevitably undergo processes of extraction, reconfiguration, and recoding. Cambodian cultural practices—such as religious beliefs and folk rituals that possess profound historical accumulation and social functions—are reduced to visual spectacles readily identifiable and consumable. *Kung Sheung Daily* (January 29, 1974) reported: "To demonstrate her fondness for snakes, she is developing a

李莎月對蛇極好感
闢園飼養各地名蛇

因一部「人蛇戀」在東南亞各地，包括香港卸收百多萬元，而使一個高棉的女演員，紅透半邊天，馬上又被邀請拍了一部「蛇魔女」，另外還有兩部正在籌拍中。有關「蛇」的故事的影片，兩部都由高棉女演員李莎月爲主角，其中一部，仍與「人」片的小女孩合作。

也因爲這個緣故，李莎月在東南亞各地，就被冠了一個「蛇后」美譽。

事實上，李莎月自從拍過「人蛇戀」之後，對於蛇，不但已不感到害怕，而且對蛇，開始有好感。

李莎月說，蛇在普通人心目中，是一種冷血可怕的毒蟲，但如果你有辦法，或對牠們友善，那麼，這冷血爬蟲，也是通曉人性的東西。

爲了表示她對蛇的好感，她正開始闢一個廣濶的花園，作爲養蛇之用，現下她正搜集世界各種稀有的蛇類。

高棉一帶是盛產毒蛇的地方，故此，那些地方的人民，很多都信奉蛇神，與馬來亞一帶，都有蛇廟建立，讓人膜拜。李莎月雖然不是信奉蛇神，現在她寓所後的一個花園，卻養了不少蛇類，其中有些是在「蛇魔女」片中，擔任過要角的。

在「人」片，那壹是戴上一個蛇髮，在「蛇魔女」一片中，李莎月也一樣要戴出那使人驚駭欲絕的蛇髮，而且還在蛇洞中，花費著幾條豆蟒玩耍，也虧得李莎月有此膽量，換上別人，嚇都嚇死才怪呢。

香港也有人以蛇爲中心拍了一部影片，由此可以知道，香港甚至世界各地的觀衆，看電影的興趣，已經大大的改變了，換句話說，除了那些色情片，永遠都是吸引觀衆的影片之外，一般的心理，大都趨向新奇刺激，越恐怖越對胃口。好像不久前有過一部以「鼠」爲中心的西片，當日賣座得很使人滿意。「蛇魔女」也是噱頭十足的一部傳奇片，受到歡迎是肯定的。

不過，話又說回來，拍「蛇魔女」這種影片，可不容易，單以虛耗菲林，就比普通的影片多花三倍以上，因爲蛇不是人，比較難於控制，也因爲這樣，成本就相應的大了。所以拍的人也不會很多。

Figure 3 | Dy Saveth's Great Fondness for Snakes: Establishing a Garden to Raise Famous Snakes from Various Locations

Note. From "李莎月對蛇極好感 闢園飼養各地名蛇" 1974, Kung Sheung Daily, February 5.

beautiful garden for snake breeding. She is currently collecting rare snake species from around the world. The Khmer region is abundant in venomous snakes; consequently, many people there worship snake deities. Similar to the Malaya region, snake temples have been established there for public veneration." (**Figure 3**: Li Shayue's Great Fondness for Snakes: Establishing a Garden to Raise Famous Snakes from Various Places) This report sutures Khmer cultural beliefs into a broader "Southeast Asian witchcraft" imaginary familiar to Chinese-speaking audiences, diminishing its distinctiveness. It represents a dimensional reduction of complex cultural systems into symbolic exotic labels, thereby adapting them to the narrative conventions and market expectations of Chinese-language commercial genre films.

Meanwhile, this symbolic strategy is further reinforced in film marketing. The poster for *The Snake King's Wife* (1971) (**Figure 4**) employs snakes entwined around a female body as its central visual element, accompanied by the tagline "The First Spectacular Film to Shake Asian Cinema," explicitly translating Cambodian religious beliefs into genre spectacles of horror and suspense. The poster's inscription "Asian Folk Tale" further generalizes the culturally specific Khmer naga worship into a vague Southeast Asian legend. This dimensional reduction enables its seamless integration into the genre conventions and market expectations of Chinese-language commercial cinema. *Wah Kiu Yat Po,* or *Overseas Chinese Daily News* (October 29, 1974) emphasized the contrast generated by her mixed heritage: "Dy Saveth is a Khmer actress with Chinese ancestry... This petite, gentle, and charming star possesses a healthy physique and beautiful features. Many find it puzzling how such a gentle and lovely actress would associate with fear-inducing snakes and even engage in intimate scenes with them during filming." (**Figure 5**: The Petite and Charming Snake Enchantress: Dy Saveth's Mastery of Snake Handling) This narrative reveals the complex mentality of the Cold War-era overseas Chinese community: on one hand, her Chinese ancestry provides cultural proximity, making her an acceptable "us"; on the other hand, her exotic behaviors from turbulent Cambodia (dancing with snakes) satisfy the Free World's Orientalist imagination of the primitive, mysterious, and even dangerous aspects behind the Iron Curtain. This narrative maintains cultural identity boundaries while providing audiences with an othering gaze from a safe distance: they can glimpse the mysteries beyond the Iron Curtain without genuinely understanding its cultural connotations or assuming political risks.

The collaborative construction of Dy Saveth's public image by the three newspapers—ranging from the generalization of her cultural background (*The Kung Sheung Daily*

Figure 4 | The Snake King's Wife(1970;《人蛇恋》)

Note. Movie posters, 1970. Left: Chinese poster; right: Thai promotional poster.

Figure 5 | The Petite and Charming Snake Enchantress: Dy Saveth's Mastery of Snake Handling

Note. From "玲瓏嫵媚蛇魔女 李莎月最擅玩蛇" 1974, Wah Kiu Yat Po, February 5.

News), to the romanticization of her mystique (*The Kung Sheung Evening Post*), and finally to the emphasis on her mixed heritage (*Wah Kiu Yat Po*)—constituted a complete mechanism of discourse production. The influx of Cambodian cultural elements seemingly enriched the thematic repertoire of Chinese-language cinema, yet in fact underwent a systematic process of "decontextualization" and "recontextualization": indigenous cultural forms were stripped of their social foundations and historical contexts, only to be reassembled into a set of genre conventions and aesthetic standards predetermined by dominant cultural centers. This unidirectional process of cultural incorporation made it difficult for cultural producers in disadvantaged regions to maintain subjectivity; instead, their cultural resources were reduced to a repository of materials and objects of imagination for stronger markets.

Ultimately, under the dual forces of commercial integration and geopolitics, the original Cambodian cultural characteristics embedded in "snake films" were rapidly diluted and replaced. This uprooting of culture occurred simultaneously with the collapse of Cambodia's domestic film industry, together constituting a cultural tragedy severed by the Cold War. Commercial logic requires that cultural products adapt to the reception habits and consumer psychology of their

target markets; thus, cultural differences are strategically amplified or diminished to maximize market returns. In this process, Cambodian filmmakers actively participated in the commodified transformation of their own culture in order to enter Chinese-language markets; media outlets collaborated to construct exotic imaginaries in pursuit of sensationalism; and audiences continuously reinforced stereotypical perceptions of the "Other" through consumption. Together, these three actors formed a self-perpetuating closed loop of cultural production and consumption. This seemingly spontaneous market behavior in fact profoundly embodied the covert operational logic of the cultural Cold War: through the production and circulation of cultural commodities, particular geopolitical imaginations and cultural hierarchies were continually reproduced and solidified.

Against this backdrop, the personal fate of Dy Saveth—the leading actress of The Snake King and the inspirational source of snake films—became a cruel microcosm of the era. Once "one of the most recognizable faces of Cambodian cinema's golden age" (Jackson, 2014), her artistic life ended abruptly with the upheavals of her nation. After the Khmer Rouge came to power, she was forced into exile, first to France and later to Hong Kong, ultimately abandoning her acting career. Her displacement was not merely an individual tragedy but symbolized the rupture of talent and historical continuity within Cambodia's entire film industry. As domestic film production in Cambodia fell completely silent after 1975, the snake film—a genre that originated from Khmer soil—saw its production center wholly transferred to and rooted in Hong Kong and Taiwan, completing its cultural migration and final settlement under the Cold War structure. The snake film phenomenon was by no means an isolated commercial case; rather, it represented a typical cross-section of cultural power operations under the geopolitical configuration of the Cold War. While Cambodia's domestic film industry perished amid political turmoil, a genre born from its cultural soil survived and continued in Hong Kong and Taiwan—an inherently paradoxical outcome of cultural migration that poignantly illustrates the profound imprint of power relations within cultural flows.

The Mechanism of Hong Kong–Phnom Penh Filmic Connectivity: Inter-city Image Circulation

From the perspective of global urban history, cities during the Cold War frequently served as hubs of transnational cultural circulation (Xiao, 1989). Hong Kong and Phnom Penh shared several characteristics, including highly commercialized media industries and multilingual, multiethnic cultural compositions. Therefore, film circulation should not be understood merely as an interaction between nation-states; rather, cities should be viewed as cultural nodes that generate inter-regional cinematic linkages through population movements, diasporic networks, and the operations of film industries.

Hong Kong's emergence as the "media capital" of the Chinese-speaking world under the Cold War was not only the result of its relatively open cultural environment but also its unique geopolitical position. Borrowing Zhang Yingjin's distinction, "translocality," rather than "transnationalism," more accurately captures the production and exhibition patterns of Teochew-language cinema. This was not a project that could be fully subsumed under the state-driven rubric of "national cinema," but a cultural channel connecting Guangdong, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam. As Curtin (2003) notes, "media capitals are sites of mediation, the locations where complex forces and flows interact; they are neither bounded entities nor autonomous formations… These new patterns of circulation should not be interpreted as multilateral in the traditional sense, because they do not involve exchanges between sovereign states." By facilitating interconnections between transnational cultural flows and peripheral spaces, Hong Kong established its position as a nodal center. In doing so, it constructed a cultural network that operated independently of state structures—a network that gave rise to linguistic, regional, and emotional communities transcending the borders of nation-states.

Communities such as Teochew, Fujianese, and Hakka not only share languages and belief systems but also maintain transregional commercial networks, educational systems, and newspaper infrastructures. These diasporic networks performed multiple roles as cultural consumers and providers of circulation channels. In the postwar period, Southeast Asian states generally adopted accelerated policies of sinicizing or naturalizing the overseas Chinese. Although Cambodia did not implement such policies as aggressively as some neighboring countries, many Chinese in Phnom Penh nevertheless remained non-citizens due to "their relatively short settlement history, their control over commercial networks, the restrictions of the Cambodian naturalization policy, and their persistent attachment to native-place consciousness" (Xiao, 1989). This politically marginal status heightened the cultural identification with the ancestral homeland. Consequently, compared with entertainment films produced by purely commercial Hong Kong studios, the works of leftist film companies—despite operating under commercial logic—maintained a distinct sense of balance in their production principles. As Shi (2006) pointed out, "The guiding principle of leftist filmmaking was not primarily to indoctrinate audiences with certain ideological or political messages, but to maintain a balanced foothold in this place through normal commercial means."

This production philosophy resulted in a realist attention to urban phenomena and the destinies of ordinary people, resonating strongly with the social conditions of diasporic audiences. Zhu Shilin candidly admitted in a letter to his daughter, "We make films in Hong Kong mainly for overseas Chinese audiences, and we must improve both artistic quality and entertainment value" (Zhu Feng & Zhu Yan, 1999). Although leftist Teochew opera films were limited in number, they benefited from financial support from the mainland

and technical assistance from the Pearl River Film Studio, as well as from the availability of professional performers from Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe. As a result, audiences praised them as exhibiting unmistakable mainland-level quality.

In early 1960s Phnom Penh, the first domestically screened Teochew opera film *Huo Shao Lin Jiang Lo*u(《火烧临江楼》) attracted overwhelming crowds at the Kim Hong Theater. Yao Xuanqiu's starring performances in *Su Liu-niang* and *Chen San & Wu-Niang* were grandly launched at the Kim Ta Theater, where "many uncles and aunties watched repeatedly and simply could not stop" (Wu, 2015). Through film consumption, the Phnom Penh Chinese community built a complex social network in which collective film viewing became an important platform for community gathering and social interaction. These public cultural spaces facilitated interethnic communication while strengthening cohesion within the Chinese diaspora. During the screenings of leftist Teochew opera films, local leftist Chinese organizations such as the "Sports Association" formed amateur troupes to stage the same opera works. This innovative practice linked them to Hong Kong's leftist cultural workers and simultaneously shifted the leadership in Teochew opera performances from commercial troupes to leftist cultural organizations—"With the influence of these Teochew opera films… Teochew opera moved from professional troupes into progressive community organizations and was endowed with new vitality" (Wu, 2015).

According to Su Zhangxi's research, *Su Liu-niang* premiered in Singapore on October 2, 1960 and ran for 72 consecutive days, breaking local box-office records. Numerous Teochew opera troupes in Singapore staged adaptations of the film, and large quantities of *Su Liu-niang*-themed New Year cards, calendars, albums, and songbooks were published. Ten days after its premiere, the opera's famous aria "Peach Blossoms Crossing the River" appeared at the Oriental Garden song stage. Amid the Teochew-language film boom, Singapore Teochew troupes' adaptations of *Su Liu-niang* demonstrated the bidirectional flow between film and opera.

The concept of vernacular, proposed by Miriam Hansen as a modern theoretical category, provides an important analytical framework for understanding transnational film circulation (Hansen, 1993). Influenced by Hansen's theory, Zhang Zhen introduced the concept of vernacular into the Chinese historical and cultural context, attempting to "liberate the term from the exclusive domain of linguists and literary historians" and extend it into the realm of everyday sensibility and material experience (Zhang, 2005). Drawing upon this perspective, the concept of the vernacular helps explain the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the use of Teochew as a localizing marker and the commercial ambition embodied in multilingual subtitles that aimed at outward circulation. While the practice of adding Mandarin subtitles to dialect films suggests a centripetal homogenizing tendency of the nation-state, the appearance of multiple subtitle versions (including Malay) for films like *Su Liu-niang* in Southeast Asia counteracted such homogenization and illustrated the coexistence of commercial forces and state power. As Zhang Zhen's analysis of Shanghai's pidgin speech reveals, hybridity and fluidity constitute the core characteristics of translocal cultural formation.

Some Teochew opera films that achieved commercial success in Southeast Asia were never screened in Hong Kong, a phenomenon that further underscores their nature as translocal cultural commodities. Beyond Teochew-language films, other genres produced by Hong Kong leftist institutions also entered the Phnom Penh market in large numbers. These films adhered to Zhou Enlai's directive for Hong Kong—"long-term planning, full utilization"—and thus muted overt communist propaganda. After the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Cambodia, Hong Kong's Nanfang Film Company even directly distributed mainland films into Phnom Penh. Zhou Degao, a Chinese Cambodian intelligence operative, later recalled, "I once felt deep affection for the Party. Watching the public security officers arrest spies in films filled me with boundless admiration" (Wu, 2015).

During this period, the political ecology of Phnom Penh's Chinese community underwent significant changes, as leftist forces gradually took control of Chinese associations, Chinese-language schools, and newspaper media. Against this backdrop, cultural exchange became a crucial vehicle for sustaining emotional bonds between overseas Chinese and their ancestral homeland. In 1960, after watching *Chen San & Wu-Niang* in Phnom Penh, Wang Kunlun, head of the China Teochew Opera Troupe, composed a poem to the tune of *Shui Diao Ge Tou,* expressing the excitement it generated among local audiences: "Sino-Cambodian relations flourish; new sounds are sent overseas. All compete to witness Wu Niang's story; grief and joy stir the Golden City."

Leftist organizations raised funds to build the Kim Ta Theater specifically for screening leftist films; meanwhile, *Mianhua Daily*, an important leftist-controlled newspaper, actively created columns for film criticism and systematically introduced mainland and Hong Kong leftist cinema. This cultural dissemination mechanism was fully demonstrated during the Teochew Opera Troupe's visit to Cambodia. Wang Kunlun's 98-line poem The Lament of San Niang was transcribed and published in Mianhua Daily with his permission, becoming a representative case of leftist cultural transmission (Lin, 2019). This cultural dissemination system—encompassing theater construction, newspaper publicity, and educational outreach—though ideologically uniform, effectively opened a channel for the spread of leftist ideas within Phnom Penh's Chinese community.

Thus, film circulation between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh during the Cold War was not driven purely by economic logic but was deeply embedded in ethnic structures, linguistic ecologies, and emotional affiliations. Hong Kong was not only a production base for Chinese cinema but also a crucial hub for the export of ideology. In the case of Phnom Penh, this transregional circulation constituted a complex cultural network: it carried the identity and native-place

sentiments of the diaspora, facilitated the cross-border circulation of audiovisual products under commercial imperatives, and was profoundly shaped by political conditions and ideological influences. Hong Kong's film presence in Southeast Asia thus reflected both cultural affinity and the tensions of global and regional politics under the Cold War. In other words, Hong Kong–Phnom Penh film circulation was not merely the movement of audiovisual commodities but a multidimensional practice where ethnic identity, cultural memory, and political context intersected.

Conclusion

Film circulation during the Cold War was neither a simple one-way dissemination nor a straightforward cultural exchange between nation-states. Instead, it constituted a multilayered, multidirectional transregional cultural system formed through the interplay of diasporic networks, commercial capital, ideological penetration, and local agency. Its formation relied on a relatively open cultural environment and Hong Kong's unique geopolitical position, as well as the mature commercial networks and highly organized cultural institutions of the overseas Chinese community.

On one hand, Phnom Penh's Chinese diaspora constructed complex social networks and cultural identities through film consumption, with internal distinctions based on dialect and native-place shaping differentiated viewing habits and cultural preferences. On the other hand, Phnom Penh's film industry—through local production, cross-border collaboration, and market feedback—exerted reverse influence on Hong Kong and the broader Chinese-language film network. The diaspora were not merely consumers of cinema; they were providers of cultural circulation channels, investors of commercial capital, and producers of emotional identification.

The political marginality experienced by overseas Chinese in postwar Southeast Asia strengthened their cultural ties to the ancestral homeland, making cinema a vital medium for sustaining emotional connections between diaspora communities and their place of origin. By treating cities as analytical units and viewing diaspora networks as structural forces, a more complex and diversified Cold War cultural landscape emerges. The case of Hong Kong and Phnom Penh demonstrates that Cold War-era cultural flows were deeply embedded in ethnic structures, linguistic ecologies, and modes of emotional attachment, shaped simultaneously by ideological confrontation, commercial logic, and local cultural agency.

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