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Selling Cantonese Opera to Southeast Asia: Institution and Network, 1925-1955

This paper examines the production and geographic networks of Cantonese opera, analyzing its mode of circulation at Southeast Asia. Here the term “Cantonese Opera” denotes, besides the conventional performance on-stage by troupes, a wider range of cultural expressions, including, for instance, Cantonese opera film and related popular publications. The main purpose of the study is to analyze the agency of two amusement institutions, namely, the Shaw Brothers (at Singapore-Malaya) and Taiping Theater (Hong Kong-Canton), in producing the regional opera genre during the first half of the 20th century. The narrative starts from the 1920s when the Shaw established the Tianyi Film Company at Shanghai. Shortly after its Cantonese opera film –*White Golden Dragon* (1933) —had created a big sensation in the Cantonese diasporic communities, the Shaw brothers realized the existence of a huge market-in-demand on the Peninsula of Malaya. In order to capture such a market, the Shaw Brothers developed their enterprise of entertainment in Southeast Asia more aggressively, by building their second film studio located at Hong Kong, acquiring picture houses and amusement parks at Singapore-Malaya, and collaborating with Hong Kong operatic institutions (Taiping Theatre) in sending Cantonese opera troupes to perform in Southeast Asia. Using museum artifacts (particularly the Taiping Theatre Collection recently donated to the Hong Kong Cultural Museum), archival materials, old newspaper clippings, popular magazines, and oral history interviews, this paper studies the local and cross-regional networks of the Shaws and Taiping. Special attention will be paid to the changes of such a network of cultural flow at various historical stages, as reflected in three plays/movies: *White Golden Dragon* (1933), *A Song that Break my Heart* (1937), and *Cantonese Opera Boat at Singapore* (1955).