



The Cross-border History of "Media Capital": A Probe into the Twin Cities Film Exchange between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh in the Early Cold War

Qian Yao Mei*

China Film Art Research Center, Beijing, 100000, China

*Corresponding author. Email: myappleid0814@163.com

Abstract. From the "Media Capital" theory perspective, this paper explores the relationship between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh in Cambodia in the early Cold War, revealing that it has both non-state nature and the packaging and export function of official ideology and showing the integration of political power and media capital. By investigating the "snake films" output in Phnom Penh, it emphasizes the two-way and interaction of cultural flow, which shows that "provincial cities" can also absorb innovative resources from "capital" through media channels and realize cultural reproduction.

Keywords: Southeast Asia; Chinese film; Chinese and overseas Chinese; Media capital

1 Introduction

During the Cold War, Hong Kong became the center of Chinese film production because of its unique geopolitical and cultural status, and Phnom Penh was one of the node cities in Hong Kong's overseas communication network. Hong Kong exports Teochew-language films and Mandarin-language leftist films to the Chinese community in Phnom Penh, while Phnom Penh adversely affects the Chinese market through "snake films". The film exchange between the two cities shows the characteristics that the city rather than the country is the core of cultural flow, which is in line with the perspective of the city center in Michael Curtin's theory of "media capital". On this basis, this paper will further explore the possibility of political power embedded in the operation of "media capital" and the initiative of "media city".

2 Teochew Opera Film: The Cross-Regional Transmission of Local Dialect from "Capital" to "Local"

The history of Chinese emigration to Cambodia can be traced back to the Angkor period [1], and the turmoil in modern China has brought about several migration climaxes, making Phnom Penh a major town where Chinese live in concentrated com-

munities: By the mid-1950s, nearly one third of the residents in Phnom Penh were Chinese (about 150,000) [2], and much of them were first-generation immigrants. Due to the short settlement time, weak intention to naturalize (only 30% of adult Chinese have been naturalized in Cambodia by the end of 1960s) and the inherent local and national consciousness, overseas Chinese generally retained the cultural traditions of their native country, and formed a stable cultural community and a fixed cultural consumption focus through self-operated religious and cultural institutions such as Chinese newspapers, Chinese schools, dialect troupes, temples, etc. At that time, Chinese in Phnom Penh were the main audiences of imported Chinese-language films [3], and they were also the fan of Teochew-Canton Opera Troupe. Because there were many Teochew people in Phnom Penh (about 100,000), Teochew opera and Teochew-language films were very popular, and the troupe belonging to the important Chinese community "Lianyou Sports Association" occupied a central position in the cultural life of overseas Chinese [4]. During the tour of the state-owned Canton Teochew Opera Troupe in 1960, theaters in Phnom Penh were even full overnight [5], which was unprecedented.

At the same time, as the center of Chinese film industry, Hong Kong has gradually formed a cultural export mechanism for overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia under the background of the Cold War. In order to meet the diversified needs of Chinese diasporas, Hong Kong filmmakers have tapped local cultural resources and made them into a variety of China local opera movies. In 1960, Hong Kong director and theatrical troupe owner Xu Jian released the first Teochew-language film *"A Pair of Carved Jade"*, which became an instant hit in Southeast Asia. The audience of Teochew opera and Teochew dialect films was basically limited to Teochew people, but at that time only 10% of Hong Kong residents were from Teochaw. Due to ideological factors, Hong Kong Teochew films also could not enter the Chaoshan market, so Southeast Asian Teochew overseas Chinese have become the main target audience. In order to cater to the interests of overseas Chinese, Teochew-language films have been transformed from "dramatized dialogue with Teochew music" to the traditional opera program that emphasizes "singing and playing", so that "Teochew-language films" are gradually equivalent to "Teochew opera films" [6]. More than 160 Teochew-language films have been released in about ten years. Many films, such as *"Hairpin Phoenix"*, *"Twin Charms"*, *"Lady of Precious Stream"* and *"Lv Mengzheng"*, have been shown in Phnom Penh and received enthusiastic response. Zhuang Xuejuan, Chu-Chiao Ting, Chor-Wai Chan and other famous actors appeared on the screen, which was "very popular among Teochew people in Phnom Penh and achieved considerable results" [7], so Teochew opera films became another important media for local Teochew people to watch films.

"Media capitals often flourish far away from state power" [8]. At that time, Hong Kong was at the "edge" of China geographically and politically, while Chinese audiences in Phnom Penh and other places were also "edge" ethnic groups in the host countries that did not have full citizenship and "gradually became an 'enclave' separated from Cambodian society and culture" [9], just as Hong Kong films were collectively referred to as "Chinese films" in Cambodia [3], and they were representatives of foreign cultures. Most of the Teochew opera films flowing on the media network

between the two places do not have the characteristics of "national movies", and some of them are even difficult to call "Hong Kong movies"-customized for overseas markets and have never been released in Hong Kong. The box office of overseas Chinese capital has been continuously flowing back to Hong Kong from "Chinatown" in various places, forming a cycle of capital concentration and reproduction, which constitutes a cultural communication channel for countries without sovereign rights. At that time, Hong Kong's status as a "media capital" was gradually formed in the transnational cultural flow. At that time, the Chinese in Phnom Penh were facing the rising Khmer nationalist regime and were facing the situation of nationality and identity choice. Dialect movies and accent operas suited Chinese people's appreciation interest, aroused their sense of cultural belonging and the life experience of fellow villagers' society, and enabled Chinese people to clearly identify themselves and conveyed their national feelings without ideological conflict with the indigenous national regime. Therefore, Phnom Penh movies and operas have become a major center of Chinese cultural life [4]. The spread of Hong Kong-made Teochew opera films in Phnom Penh is a cultural connection between cities established among transnational dialect groups. It relies on the emotional structure, dialect network and box office cycle within the overseas Chinese community, continuing the sense of homesickness and cultural belonging, enhancing the cohesion within the community and consolidating the "non-sovereign" cultural common community.

3 Leftist Movies: The Political Function of "Media Capital"

Since 1959, Hong Kong leftist companies such as Sun Luen Film Company and Phoenix Motion Picture Company have also started to shoot Teochew opera films, and films such as *"The Story of Sixth Madam Su"*, *"The Father-Killing Case"* and *"The Love Story of Chen San and Wu Niang"* have been shown in the Cine Phnom Penh Theater in Phnom Penh, and it was hard to get a ticket because there are so many audiences. [7] Leftist Teochew opera films were guided by Beijing in terms of project establishment and funds, all of which were shot with expensive color films, and they can also use highly specialized state-owned theatrical troupes, and the quality of films far exceeded that of small companies; Ideologically, they also showed the achievements of the state-dominated reform of Chinese traditional operas, and implicitly conveyed ideological information. For example, *"The Story of Sixth Madam Su"* deletes the plot of "cutting flesh from one's thigh" in the original opera to promote the old morality of "chastity", enriches the images of the bottom figures such as hand-maids, adds life scenes, and is full of human feelings and comedy; *"Swallows Greet the Spring"* records the teaching situation of the state-run Shantou Theatre School. In the past, the child opera performer (*tongling*) was at the bottom of the troupe, but now they were studying in a clean campus, conveying the progressive picture of the red China guarding folk culture and renewing the artistic lifeline. These well-made Leftist Teochew opera films have clear audience orientation and strategic significance. Together with the "overseas Chinese returning to China for sightseeing" and the "stories about the motherland" frequently appearing in Leftist Chinese newspapers like *the*

Chinese-Cambodian Daily (Mien Hwa Ri Bao), they have constructed a moderate, progressive and democratic national image, and guided political identity by cultural identity, trying to appease some overseas Chinese who had doubts about red China during the Cold War, strive for recognition and support, and play a United front role in the "leftist and rightist" dispute between Chinese communities.

Apart from Teochew opera films, Hong Kong leftist Mandarin and Cantonese films were also exported to Phnom Penh in large quantities, such as "*A Forgotten Wife*", "*The Gold-Plated Man*", "*October Bride*", "*The Jade Bow*", "*The Great Devotion*". These films are aimed at overseas Chinese, "harmony is the main theme", "progress, kind and patriotic" [10]. The revolutionary color was hidden, but instead they present the themes of ethical affection, self-reliance and exile, which are highly consistent with the practical experience and psychological expectations of overseas Chinese, and have won high praise in Phnom Penh and achieved continuous success [7]. At the same time, "after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Cambodia, a large number of films and books from Chinese mainland poured in Cambodia" [7], and many films of "seventeen years", such as "*Five Golden Flowers*", "*The Eternal Wave*", "*Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*" and "*Railway Guerrillas*", were distributed to Cambodia by the Hong Kong leftist Southern Film Company. In addition to the inherent distribution channels of the leftist camp, these films also depend on the cross-camp distribution cooperation centered on Hong Kong: non-leftist film trusts such as the Shaw Brothers Pictures, the Kong Ngee Co. and the Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong) Limited. also bought a large number of copyrights for the commercial value of leftist films to supplement their own cinemas. Their affiliated theaters or cooperative theaters in Phnom Penh, such as the Hawaii Cinema, Kim Phong Cinema, Kirirom Cinema, Cine Phnom Penh and Cine Capitol [11] (also often owned by Chinese), have become an important stronghold of Chinese films in Cambodia, where Chinese films from different camps coexist. Among them, the ideology of mainland films is more radical, and together with China revolutionary literature and art, such as "*The White-Haired Girl*", "*The Red Guards on Hong Lake*" and "*Red Rock*", which have already spread in Chinese society, it creates a cultural atmosphere that is "close to the mainland" and changes the ideas and cultural interests of young people in the overseas Chinese community.

At the same time, the pattern of overseas Chinese in Phnom Penh was undergoing drastic changes. In the late 1950s, the rightist gentry, businessmen and overseas Chinese leaders who leaned to the Nationalist government in Taiwan gradually lost power, and the leftists took over key organs such as guilds, Chinese schools and Chinese newspapers [2]. They also tried to strengthen the organization and leadership of grass-roots workers and intellectual youth by setting up night schools and "Sports Club". With the strengthening of leftist organizations, the missionary nature of films has also been emphasized: In Phnom Penh, the Chinese-run "Cine Phnom Penh" and other theaters provided projection platforms for Hong Kong leftist and mainland films; Bookstores such as Xingwen and Wangshengli specialized in selling Chinese mainland books and periodicals, and overseas Chinese could buy the latest magazine of *Popular Movies* at any time to learn about mainland China's film industry. As for Chinese newspapers, *the Chinese-Cambodian Daily*, which has the largest circulation,

set a film review group and mainly promoting leftist films made in mainland China and Hong Kong. Since the film review group functioned through collective division of labor and were primarily tasked with "cultivating patriotic sentiment among readers", individual authorial characteristics were seldom evident in the reviews, which instead were required to adhere to the "politically correct orientation" in their evaluations. One of the movie critic recalls that: "We must praise them...those movies were all healthy, wonderful and educational, and they were totally worth seeing again and again" [7]. In youth clubs, when Leftist films were shown, the Sports Club would rehearse corresponding plays, such as "the Oriental Sports Club" (*Dongfang*) and "The Story of Sixth Madam Su", and "the New Youth Sports Club" (*Xinqing*) would rehearse "The Father-Killing Case", which boosted the film's reputation and influence. In Chinese schools, schools such as Duanhua and Zhongshan have taught students songs and dances in "The Red Guards on Hong Lake" and "The White-Haired Girl" and encouraged them to watch movies produced by Red China. Some radical overseas Chinese schools even dismissed "Rightist" films produced by Shaw, Golden Harvest and Taiwanese film studios as "porn film" and prohibited students from watching them. Offenders would be severely criticized by propaganda posters. The cultural communication network of Chinese society effectively expanded the influence of leftist movies objectively.

"The policy of leftist films is to export films to places where overseas Chinese live in concentrated communities through Hong Kong, so as to realize ideological infiltration" [12]. In Cambodia, this transnational flow was completed with the cooperation of Beijing, Hong Kong and Phnom Penh: Beijing formulated policies, provided funds and troupe and other resources; Hong Kong "softened" the national will into commercial production and connected to Chinatown through commercial distribution channels; The Chinese community in Phnom Penh set up a screening point and organized publicity to let the film penetrate into the daily consumption of overseas Chinese. In terms of communication effect, Hong Kong Leftist films and mainland films reflects the "progressive" national imagination of PRC, which has a deep influence on the native young generation. At that time, the curriculum of Chinese schools in Cambodia was basically the same as that of schools in mainland China, "reading Chairman Mao's books and singing Chairman Mao's songs" [13]. Chinese education combined with cultural consumption such as movies has built an overseas "Ideological State Apparatus" and promoted the expansion and "reproduction" of the leftist camp. Political narratives, symbols and "revolutionary heroism" from the red China have enabled many Chinese Cambodian youth to gain emotional resonance and have a lofty sense of mission in the grand narrative of "The Rise of the Motherland" and "The World Revolution". As one Chinese Cambodian, then a high school student, recalled: "When I saw model soldiers of the communist army like Dong Cunrui and Lei Feng on silver screens, I admired them so much" "When I was arrested by the Cambodian policemen, I even had the heroic illusion that I was in the plot of the (leftist) film *The Eternal Wave*". [14] The identity of young people has changed from an alien whose ancestors only did business and had no political rights to a self-conscious "revolutionary subject" and has become the dominant force of the "new school". The political and strategic significance of Hong Kong's "media capital" has also been fully activated in

this transnational and cross-camp communication system, and it has become a hub connecting Beijing's will with overseas Chinese communities through technical support, intermediary dispatch and community mobilization.

4 "The Snake Girl Drops in": A Phnom Penh Film Striving Against Adversity

In the global cultural network, foreign cultural resources are often absorbed and used by the powerful media capital, forming a mixed aesthetic [8], as is the relationship between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh film industry. In the early 1970s, some Cambodian filmmakers strove against adversity and pushed local films into the Chinese-language market dominated by Hong Kong through film exhibitions and co-productions. Among them, Huy Keung, a producer with Khmer cultural background and Chinese businessmen's transnational operation ability, is quite representative. In 1973, he participated in the Asian Film Festival with the Khmer-language film "*Puos Keng Kang*" (1970) adapted from Cambodian folklore, and won six awards. He entered into the Hong Kong market and earned more than one million Hong Kong dollars at the box office, which became popular in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, Huy Keung took advantage of the victory to produce "*The Snake Girl*" (1974) and "*The Snake Girl Drops In*" (1975), which made the "snake film" gradually enter the Chinese market.

As the production company changed from "Dararoth Film Production" in Phnom Penh to "Hong Kong Jinshan Film", the three "snake films" were gradually translated into the common Chinese genre language in terms of form and content: From the complete plot of each scene in "*Puos Keng Kang*" to the three-act Hollywood drama structure in "*The Snake Girl Drops In*", the narrative of the snake films gradually standardized, and the stories tended to be fabricated without specific folk stories; The cast transitioned from the local Cambodian team to Hong Kong and Taiwan cast members, such as Tian Feng and Kuangchao Chiang. The visual style gradually gone native, and the image of snake girl changed from a simple, restrained and quiet Cambodian peasant girl to a "modern savage" with bikini, heavy eye makeup and unrestrained sex appeal, with a hippie-like style of sexual liberation, accompanied by the appearance of famous image symbols such as Tarzan, Bruce Lee and Japanese samurais. In addition, the snake girl was named "Green Snake" and "White Snake", like the names of roles in the well-known Chinese ancient novel *The Legend of the White Snake*. The hybrid reconstruction makes the snake films gradually break away from its Khmer cultural roots and become a popular foreign horror type. The director also made Cambodia's religion and culture self-otherized and commercialized, interspersed with folk performances and "witchcraft" in the film, and promoted Dy Saveth, a Cambodian actress, as "keeping a lot of snakes", "being able to communicate with snakes" and even "falling in love with snakes" [14], creating a star myth of the integration of virtual and real, and satisfying the Chinese audience's desire to stare at "exotic places" in Hong Kong and other places. The original Buddhist concept of reincarnation, traditional female images and narrative methods gave way to the logic

of popular culture. After the Khmer Rouge came to power, Cambodia's film industry was interrupted, and the production center of snake films was transplanted from Phnom Penh to Hong Kong and Taiwan, resulting in films such as "*Snake Queen*", "*Calamity of Snakes*", "*Mysterious Snake Women*" and "*The Snake Prince*", which constituted the sub-types of Chinese thrillers.

However, this "upstream" cultural flow is not a one-way passive catering. During the same period, Hong Kong films shown in Phnom Penh began to be dubbed in Khmer, which stimulated Khmer audiences' enthusiasm for Chinese films, and Cambodia became the third largest overseas market for Hong Kong-made films. Among them, costume films telling Chinese ancient folktales such as "*Xue Rengui Conquers the West*", "*Butterfly Lovers*" and "*Cowherd and Weaver Girl*" are particularly popular, and local filmmakers have accordingly remade at least eight Khmer-language films. These films were replaced with Khmer styles visually, and their contents met the needs of Khmer society. The Chinese cultural resources in Hong Kong were taken away from the national background and became universal morality. For example, "*Panjapori Devi*", adapted from "*Butterfly Lovers*", propagandizes karma, while "*Si Yin Kuy*" adapted from *Xue Rengui Conquers the West* entrusts anti-aggression patriotism and nationalism, which is in line with Cambodia's popular psychology of resisting Vietcong invasion at that time. The reinterpretation and re-creation of local society both serve the self-construction of local culture and "finally form a cultural tool to restore Khmer identity". "Snake films" is a symbol of the "other" in foreign countries, but it can also be appreciated by all ethnic groups in Cambodia. Among them, Buddhist morality, folk animism and Angkor aesthetic elements all confirm Khmer cultural traditions and national characteristics and participate in the construction of national identity. Its production and marketing through Chinese commercial channels show the cooperation of different ethnic groups in the cultural communication network. Chinese culture is embedded in the historical experience of hundreds of years of integration and symbiosis between Chinese and Cambodian ethnic groups, and it has become a raw material for local culture to absorb, rewrite and build itself. Although Chinese-language movies were still treated as foreign products, stories originating in China are no longer regarded as foreign stories. The two-way media flow between Phnom Penh and Hong Kong shows that the media capital is not the absolute destination of cultural resources, and "foreign" is not simply a provider of export markets and innovative resources. Media cities can use media capital's cultural resources to serve the construction of their own cultural identity.

5 Conclusion

The film exchange between Hong Kong and Phnom Penh during the Cold War was the intersection and interaction of geopolitics and cultural capital. As a cultural intermediary, Hong Kong spreads emotion and ideology through Teochew opera films and leftist films, and also absorbs innovative resources from the reverse flow of "snake films" in Phnom Penh. Among them, the export of Leftist films in Hong Kong is not a simple commercial act, but a political act with the help of the neutrality of colonial

cities and commercial channels, and the same is true for the acceptance of the Chinese community in Phnom Penh. Future research can be further extended to the horizontal flow of media among other "Chinatown" cities, as well as the interactive relationship between film media and politics, identity and ethnic groups, and further open the research path of Chinese film history during the Cold War.

Reference

1. Zhou Daguan, Huang Shengzeng. The Customs of Chenla [M] Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2022:173. Alt: <https://book.douban.com/subject/36212776/>
2. Luo Yang. The History of Overseas Chinese in Cambodia [M] Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2023:392 Alt: <https://book.douban.com/subject/36193628/>
3. Daravuth LY, Ingrid MUAN. Cultures of Independence: an Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950's and 1960's [M].2002:358. Alt: <https://book.douban.com/subject/26798850/>
4. Willmott WE. Congregations and Associations: the Political Structure of the Chinese Community in Phnom-Penh, Cambodia. Comparative Studies in Society and History. 1969;11(3):282-301. DOI: 10.2307/2799084 Alt: JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178086>. Accessed 15 June 2026.
5. Zeng Yanwen. "Cultural Exchange and Identity in the Dissemination and Transformation of Teochew Opera in Southeast Asia." Theatre Home, 2025(07): 16–18. Alt:https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=qQAO62XqY5IPAW3ilrUUMETqGm7LyOrSHxsjLwart-MixBR9xQfmyBwwHOPdviZPUXCCK4rqFk1BdkcHzvXcCZjrEtlvwjyT07XV-RK3eF7uvfRTRfHbC9WhzBmOsflbX9ZxgUrOJlG0uszhIfvCUjcmq3ySDaVE3_s2oWYUkpjo=&uniplatform=NZKPT. Accessed 15 June 2026.
6. Zhang Zhifeng. "From Su Liuniang: On the Interaction between Teochew Opera and Teochew Cinema in the 1960s." Journal of Fine Arts, 2022(06): 34–39. Alt:<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=qQAO62XqY5J25C6My9pYG2BcmRzXb8ArG55jof7mh06PgSiuKGFHmVk4FtP2CWgFNmQQV-PUxMI-809FlzNTVOpPGQx5yBpG40q3LGg2EAwCj8y2H9Q8xISiCeKUCXpxYPL0xOOffp-L-S34P5T8SqBehipoMCytA0R6yANQ0wk=&uniplatform=NZKPT>. Accessed 15 June 2026.
7. Lao Niu (Wu Changgui). Cangsang Shiyi [EB/OL]. Alt: http://www.kokchailu.com/2026/01/blog-post_23.html
8. Michael Curtin. The Conditions for the Generation of a "Media Capital" : The Local Context of Global Media, in Li Jinquan (Ed.). "International Communication" Internationalization [M]. Communication University of China Press, 2022:344 Alt: <https://book.douban.com/subject/36160333/>
9. Zhao Weifang. The Aesthetic Strategies and Influences of Left-wing Filmmakers in Hong Kong under the Background of the Cold War [J]. Sichuan Drama,2021,(04):12-18. Alt:https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=qQAO62XqY5LqwveEnyVts-1hbTsNz2KFkdCejguYzLEaoWFWD0MZW6xgV_Rr_SRKyD1E2NTyR7k7IKmki9jkGQ19TGgAyAt_LM-w4pEN3m1qgHFfs4b_VrAnJOB8rAQpWcWgF9lcbn12sfcpnDA1eskH6XqNASnxCL7im_3BPE=&uniplatform=NZKPT. Accessed 15 June 2026.
10. Materials provided by Preah Sorya Group, a Cambodian film research organization, on December 17, 2022
11. Kang Ning. The International Dissemination of Hong Kong Film Culture[M] Jincheng Publishing House, 2023:260 Alt: <https://book.douban.com/subject/36681083/>

12. Hou Yu, the status quo and development trend of Chinese language education in Cambodia [EB/OL]. Alt: <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/131/699.shtml>
13. Vita Chieu, Edited by James Zhu. My Untold Story[M].Bookman Books, 2010:320
Alt:https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Khmer_Rouge_and_Red_China.html?id=dEMgMwEACAAJ
14. Dy Saveth, the charming girl who is good at playing with snakes. [N] Overseas Chinese Daily (Hong Kong), October 29, 1974 (5).
Alt:<https://sls.hkpl.gov.hk/digital-collection/tc/contentcoverpage.html?currentPosition=6&searchId=45887055408d41609c8f76d49afe131d&catalogueId=19064d3f9cb711ef9c2&mainKeyword=%E6%9D%8E%E8%8E%E6%9C%88&isHKMP=>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

