

Exporting Films, Expanding Chineseness: Chinese Movies in San Francisco and Honolulu in the 1920s

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1 United Exchange and the Overseas Market for Chinese Films

With the flourishing of the Chinese movie industry during the early 1920s, the export and exhibit of Chinese movies overseas became a *Merkmal* by which the commercial and honorary success of a movie could be judged.¹⁾ From the beginning of the 1920s, a large number of movies shot by the Film Division of the Commercial Press were exported overseas. However, it was the epoch-making overseas success of *Grandson* (*Gu'er jiuzu ji*), produced by the Star Motion Picture Company, that accelerated the export of Chinese movies to foreign countries. *Grandson* was primarily received by Chinese immigrant communities in Southeastern Asian countries and had a total box office which exceeded fifty thousand *yuan*, a total not surpassed by any other Chinese movies for years. The success of *Grandson* demonstrated that the overseas market was the more significant market for mainland movie than that of Chinese cities, and simultaneously led to the establishment of United Exchange (*Liuhe yingpian yingye gongsi*), China's first film distribution company. United Exchange consisted of staff delegated from five leading movie production companies including the Star Motion Picture Company, the Dazhonghuabaihe Film Company, the Shenzhou Film Company, the Shanghai Photoplay Company and the Hwajet (Huaju) Film Company. These were the leading movie production companies in Shanghai, the center of the Chinese

film industry. As soon as it was established in June 1926, United Exchange began to grow the market for Chinese movies both inside and outside the mainland. United Exchange opened its Hankou office in August 1926, which controlled film distribution in Hunan and Hubei provinces, and branch offices in Tianjin, Canton, as well as in each representative city in Southeastern Asia soon followed. Moreover, United Exchange franchised movie houses not merely inside local cities on the mainland, but also around the Pacific Rim, including in the Philippine and Hawaii.²⁾

Honolulu's Park Theatre, which is very important to this article, was the most distant movie house among the film theaters under United Exchange's control. Even though the Hawaiian market for Chinese movies did not make up a significant share of the overall market for Chinese movies, it is nonetheless quite significant because it shows a remarkable difference when compared with the markets in cities in the US or in Chinese immigrant communities in Southeastern Asia. Compared to San Francisco's Chinatown, for instance, the popular culture history of Honolulu's Chinese immigrant community has not been paid much scholarly attention, even though Honolulu's Chinese immigrant community matched that of San Francisco in terms of populations and, importantly for this article, the number of Chinese cinemas. In 1930, the population of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco was almost 16,000, while in the same year, that in Honolulu had already exceeded 19,000³⁾, a figure that was primarily due to the smooth economic development of sugar plantations and resulting comfortable quality of life.⁴⁾ During the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese immigrants in San Francisco could enjoy mainland-made Chinese movies in at most two film theaters, while those in Honolulu also benefited from two Chinese movie houses. These facts might suggest that Honolulu was, for Shanghai distributors like United Exchange, attractive in terms of box office. Honolulu was also a transit

port for steamer lines across Pacific Ocean, which possibly brought some advantages to both film distributors in mainland China and film exhibitors in Honolulu. These were not, however the only benefits for United Exchange. When compared to the Chinese film market in Southeastern Asia, where there was a greater number of Chinese-origin moviegoers, the Chinese film markets in Honolulu and San Francisco were still too limited to be profitable enough. Ren Jinpin, one of the founders of the Star Motion Picture Company, a pre-1949 representative movie production company and one of the members of United Exchange, pointed out that the average box office of a single Chinese movie from Southeast Asian Chinese immigrant communities exceeded the total sales from cities in the mainland.⁵⁾ What then motivated distributors to keep covering such a tiny and geographically segregated market as Honolulu? Does this suggest that the purpose of exporting movies was not limited to commercial reasons but also included other causes? To answer these questions, this article explores not only Chinese movies' process of expansion toward the American market but also how Chinese immigrants identified themselves through movie-going within multi-layered communities composed of Chinese-ness (both national and local), and American-ness.

2 United Exchange's Cinema Franchising and Park Theatre in Honolulu

As mentioned in previous section, after its founding in June 1926, United Exchange immediately expanded its distribution network for Chinese movies both inside and outside China. The company held 22 cinemas inside China, and two in Honolulu and the Philippines, respectively.⁶⁾ In addition to these cinemas, United Exchange also formed an alliance with cinemas in Southeastern Asia; in Singapore, these alliances were with Marlborough

Theatre, China (Zhonghua) Cinema, and Empire Cinema, small to mid-scale movie houses with about 700 seats, as well as well-known cinemas which periodically exhibited Chinese-language movies during the 1920s.⁷⁾

When established, United Exchange set out its mission as making film more sophisticated as well as promoting the film trade inside and outside China.⁸⁾ To carry out its mission, United Exchange thus organized a film inspection board to judge whether a movie sent to them was worth exhibiting in Central Cinemas Corporations (*Zhongyang yingxi gongsi*), United Exchange's flagship cinema chain. The company also required film productions to sign an exclusivity contract, promising not to send their movies to other distributors or movie houses, which caused film producers to complain that they were losing alternative distribution opportunities for their movies and, ironically, resulted in the organization's collapse in 1929. United Exchange was a short-lived film distribution company, but was nevertheless significant in that established the overseas market for Chinese movies, and brought large box office revenues to the mainland. Accordingly, by the end of the 1920s, the overseas box office revenues of a Chinese movie made up more than half of its total box office revenues.⁹⁾

As discussed above, United Exchange's overseas network primarily covered Southeastern Asia, which makes it quite difficult to determine whether there was indeed any need for the company to form the alliance with Park Theatre, located in the middle of Pacific Ocean, though at the time, it had been unknown how beneficial this alliance would be. To clarify this confusion, I will focus on the process of expanding the Chinese movie market toward North America, first examining the case of San Francisco, then Honolulu, in terms of the cultural friction among the modern culture which had emerged in Shanghai, the Cantonese culture traditionally shared among Chinese immigrant communities, and the Americanization of the immigrants

in San Francisco.

3 The Business Expansion of Chinese movie productions: the case of San Francisco

As mentioned above, the Film Division of Commercial Press, during the 1920s a representative movie production company in Shanghai, was well aware of the significance of exporting their movies overseas, possibly because the company knew that there was a certain market for Chinese-language books in Chinese immigrant communities. The company may also have had the knowledge and the network necessary to export material overseas. Shanghai's newspaper reported in 1923 that the Film Division of Commercial Press had successively exported one of their long-length feature films, *The Prodigal Son Redeemed*¹⁰⁾ (in Chinese "Lianhua luo," nominally "A lotus flower scattering," directed by Ren Pengnian in 1923), which was bought by an American film distributor for a high price and gained popularity in US cities.¹¹⁾ However, according to articles which appeared in Chinese-language newspapers published in San Francisco and Honolulu, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the movies shot by the Film Division of Commercial Press were actually shown in both cities. In this article, I first explore the case of San Francisco, which will make it easier to understand the case of Honolulu.

An article appeared in *Chun Sai Yat Po*, a well-known Chinese newspaper in San Francisco, noting that the Xinhua company had exported a Chinese movie named *The Cost of Drinking* (*Zuixiang yihen*), a feature film produced by Commercial Press, and they would present them on Saturday, April 24 and Sunday, April 25 1926.¹²⁾ This showing was not, however, part of a commercial exhibition but for entertainment purposes, as part of an event held by the Chinese American Citizens Alliance [*Tongyuan zonghui*].

The event also included the showing of a documentary film, *The Funeral and Memorial Meeting for Mr. San Yat-sen* [*Sun Zhongshan xiansheng chubin ji zhuidao zhi dianli*], shot by a well-known Hong Kong film production company, China Sun Film Company [*Minxin yingpian gongsi*] under the trust of the Guangzhou National Government. Although San Francisco was home to the largest Chinatown in North America, few Chinese movies were shown there before this event. The only exception found through the course of my research was the showing of *The New Edition of Xue Pinggui's Life Story* [*Xinbian Xue Pinggui quanzhuan*], shot by the Chinese Educational Film Company [*Zhonghua yizhi yinghua gongsi*], a San Francisco film company, in February 1926.¹³⁾

In 1927, the Great Wall Film Company Ltd., established in the early 1920s by Chinese students who had studied in the United States and later moved to Shanghai, started to direct their movies toward Chinese population in San Francisco. Liu Zhaoming, one of the company's founders, held a lecture titled "Shanghai's Present Situation [*Shanghai de xianzhuang*]" at the Chinese YMCA in San Francisco. In this lecture, Liu used several educational films as visual aids.¹⁴⁾ On June 18, soon after Liu's lecture, the Chinese YMCA also held a movie event at the Chinese Church on Clay Street, where several documentary films shot by the Great Wall Film Company were screened¹⁵⁾. These events were held as part of the preliminary stages for the company's new project for expanding their business: through newspaper advertisements, they declared their intent to export their movies to the United States, Canada, and Alaska, with Liu Zhaoming and Tan Zhi, directing the company's North American businesses.¹⁶⁾ However, the Great Wall Film Company's movies were not successfully exhibited in commercial theaters in San Francisco. After *Pearl Necklace* (*Yichuan zhenzhu*) was screened at the Chinese Church at Clay Street on August 8, there no further news

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appeared about showings of the company's movies. Chinese movies were brought to San Francisco only occasionally and quite accidentally. This was partly because few members of the Great Wall Film Company were used to studying and working in the United States before establishing their company and seeking to expand into North America.¹⁷⁾ The company also set up a branch office in New York around 1927,¹⁸⁾ but it is quite difficult to trace their actual business activities due to a lack of information.

I would like to consider the issue from a different perspective here, however. Canton was well known as the origin of Chinese immigrants around the world, and San Francisco's Chinatown was not an exception. Although the center of Chinese movie production was located in Shanghai, there are also not a few movie production companies in Canton. Notably, a number of Chinese movies shot by Canton's movie production companies were frequently exported to Southeast Asian Chinese communities. The China Sun Motion Pictures Company was a well-known movie production company based both in Canton and Hong Kong. The Diamond Film Company (*Guangzhou zuanshi huodong yinghua gongsi*), and the Great Wall Film Company had many staff member who were also originally from Canton. Movies shot by these Cantonese production companies created a certain market scale in Singapore and other cities in Southeast Asia. If we take into consideration that most Chinese movies exhibited in San Francisco during the 1920s were made by Canton-origin film companies, we could provisionally conclude that Canton-origin companies attempted to expand their market in North America using the identical business model they carried out in Southeast Asia: a model which depended on the immigrant network between Canton and Chinese immigrant communities. Nevertheless many of these film companies had failed to make it in North America.

Chen Yong, the author of a comprehensive and omnidirectional

history of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco from the 19th to the early 20th century, has pointed out that during this era, “acculturation became visible in many aspects of social life,”¹⁹⁾ including not only language and daily habits and customs, but also movie watching practices. Around the turn of the 1930s to the 1940s, “movie theaters outside Chinatown ran extensive advertisements in all Chinese newspapers, especially the *Chinese Times*.”²⁰⁾ It could be said that watching China-made movies was, whether they were produced in Shanghai or Canton, a practice that pushed against “acculturation” into mainstream American society, causing the failure of Chinese-origin film productions which aimed to expand their business in North America; it was not until the mid-1930s that a large number of Cantonese-language movies were periodically exhibited in many North American cities.

4 Chinese Movies in Honolulu in the Early Years: Watching Chinese Movies, Establishing Transnational Identities

The Chinese immigrant community in Hawaii was slightly different from that in North America in that “as many as half of the Chinese were local born” by the third decade of the 20th century and “had little experience with the physical act of migration and were more likely to conceptualize their future primarily in terms of Hawaii”;²¹⁾ however, Chinese Hawaiians still put a certain amount of significance on keeping their ties with the mainland. Accordingly, as Adam Mckeown has pointed out in his book, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*, which first employed the notion of diaspora in the field of Chinese immigrant history, the Chinese in Hawaii gradually identified themselves “in terms of Hawaii as a coherent ethnic group in a multicultural society” by the 1920s. Their primary interest was “the rise of China as a modern nation,” rather than the reforms and the revolution,

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which resulted in a “(l)ocal Chineseness [that] was critically shaped by American Patriotic rhetoric.”²²⁾ If “Becoming an American” was equal to “understanding modern China” in Honolulu (whereas in San Francisco Chinese immigrants faced immediate and strong pressure to assimilate into the mainstream), watching Chinese movies in Honolulu could be a useful and popular way to form such a multicultural identity. Indeed, this cultural background was peculiar to Hawaii and resulted in the successful introduction of Chinese-made movies to Honolulu, including those distributed by United Exchange.

Although Honolulu was an important transit port for the steamship lines connecting North American cities to East Asian port cities,²³⁾ there was no relationship between Chinese movies exhibited in San Francisco and those shown in Honolulu, which suggests that these Chinese movies were independently and accidentally brought in by different distributors; each city had its own routes for importing Chinese movies and never shared their routes, at least before the 1930s. In other words, there was a strong need to establish a new immigrant identity within Honolulu’s Chinese community, which resulted in the import of Chinese movies, as a form of modern entertainment which was greeted with a more enthusiastic response than in San Francisco. In *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii*, Glarence E. Glick pointed out that “Chinese movies were brought to Honolulu in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but box-office receipts were too low to pay for showing them daily or even weekly.”²⁴⁾ However, neither the box office receipts nor the frequency of Chinese movie exhibitions are notable here; what is the most significant here is the purpose under which they were imported and demonstrated. Commercial Press movies were shown in Honolulu much earlier than San Francisco. On January 3, 1925, a large advertisement appeared in *Xin Zhongguo Bao*, a Chinese-language

newspaper in Honolulu, known as “*New China Press*” in English, promoting “new movies from the homeland” at Li Cheng Theatre,²⁵⁾ a small ethnic theater on Alakea Street Honolulu’s Chinatown (see fig.1).²⁶⁾ Although there are some unidentified names on the advertisement, it seems that the exhibitor was “*Yi gu li shu shi*,” possibly meaning “English Book Store,” which, according to another article, was owned by a Chinese immigrant named Peng Ai.²⁷⁾ During the two week showing held by Peng Ai, a total of seven movies were screened, both short and long, and narrative or documentary, most of which were probably produced by the Film Division of Commercial Press (due to the inconsistency of the movies’ titles, the investigation into identifying these movies is ongoing).

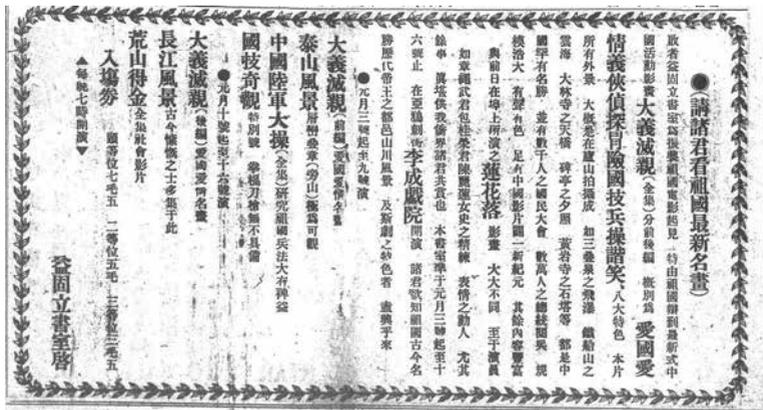


Fig. 1 The advertisement for a screening of Chinese movies in *New China Press*, January 3, 1925

While the background to importing these Shanghai-made films has not yet been unraveled, what is most significant about the ad is the appearance of two different terms indicating “movie”: “*dianying*” and “*yinghua*.” Since the late 19th century when cinematographs were brought

to Shanghai, the term for “movie” had been unclear. “*yingxi*” became the most popular term used by the 1910s, but, until the early 1920s, it still meant both “movie” and “magic lantern.” It was not until in the mid-twentieth century that the word “*dianying*” replaced “*yingxi*,” mostly when stressing movies’ novelty. By the late 1920s, “*dianying*” had become a popular word, which indicated a more cultural, artistic, and academic mood than “*yingxi*.” In Canton, however, “*yinghua*” was, in most cases, the most popular word for “movie” until the 1930s; this word never used in Shanghai. The usage of “*dianying*” in juxtaposition with “*yinghua*,” a word tinged with a Cantonese flavor, never appeared in Chinese newspapers in San Francisco. In *Chun San Yat Po*, “*yinghua*” was quite popular and use of “*dianying*” was rare until in the 1940s.²⁸⁾ This curious word choice indicates that Peng Ai and his bookstore could have supported the reforms in the mainland and may have been one of the cultural progressivists who agreed with the spirit of the May Fourth Movement which occurred in 1919. The admission fee for this event also shows that the screening of Chinese movies by Peng Ai was not for commercial purposes but rather, more likely, for educational purposes. There were different admission prices based on seat quality: 75 cents for first class, 50 cents for second, and 35 cents for third class seats. By comparison, the admission fee for the ethnic theaters where Cantonese Operas were performed, like the Liberty Theatre, was usually between 35 cents and 1.50 dollars. It seems to be quite clear that Peng Ai’s movie screenings were priced reasonably enough and suggests that the events were staged for the purpose of introducing new culture from the homeland.

The second wave of exhibiting Chinese movies in Honolulu occurred in the summer of the same year. A newspaper advertisement in *New China Press* on July 11, 1925 (See Fig. 2) described the screening of Chinese movies on July 14 at Li Cheng Theatre, and also showed the same curious word

choice as the movie exhibition staged six months previously: the juxtaposition of these two different words for “movie,” “*dianying*” and “*yinghua*.” The advertisement also added the extra information about the three movies to be shown this time: *The Cost of Drinking*, *The Funeral and memorial meeting for Mr. San Yat-sen*, and *Between Love & Filial Duty* [*Zhaixing zhi nü*]²⁹⁾, produced by the Shanghai Shenzhou Film Company, according to the ad.

However, none of these films was actually produced by the Shenzhou Film Company. As

mentioned in the previous section of this article, *The Cost of Drinking* and *The Funeral and memorial meeting for Mr. San Yat-sen* were shot by Commercial Press and the China Sun Film Company, respectively. *Between Love & Filial Duty* was a full-length narrative film directed by Li Zeyuan and Mei Xuetao, the founders of the Great Wall Film Company. If we dare not regard this as a simple mistake by the advertisement’s creators, this strange inconsistency should be read as advertiser’s stance against movies as a tool for expressing modernity and reflecting the homeland’s progressive culture. The Shenzhou Film Company was one of the founders of United Exchange and was known for its unique origins. Some of its members had



Fig. 2 The advertisement for a screening of Chinese movies by Yu Yi and his younger brother, which appeared in *New China Press*, July 11, 1925

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studied or worked in France; one of the members had even experienced joining movie production as an actor. The Shenzhou Film Company's movies were artistic and their color was called "the Shenzhou taste (*Shenzhou pai*)" among film critics in Shanghai. By borrowing the name of this modern film company, the advertisement thus seems to emphasize their event as a modern and advanced activity without precedent.

Accordingly, the exhibition of Chinese movies in this time was, as with the former events, a non-profit enterprise. Although important information about the event is still lacking, it must be pointed out that this event was a kind of spin-off of another event: a lecture by Y. C. James Yen (Yen Yangchu), the founder of the Chinese National Association of the Mass Education Movement (*Zhonghua pinmin jiaoyu cujin hui*) established in 1923. James Yen was a well-known educator who dedicated himself to improving literacy in China. Yen visited Honolulu to attending the YMCA's Pan-Pacific Conference on behalf of China. Yen's lectures in Honolulu were presented on July 15 at the YMCA and on July 19 at Liberty Theatre. Just after Yen's second lecture, the Chinese immigrant community in Honolulu began a large donation campaign to support Yen's activities. Members of the campaign requested donations from readers of the newspaper by appealing that "a mere half dollar can enable a poor person in China to study for four months and learn one thousand and two hundred Chinese characters."³⁰ This newspaper report also listed the names of members who managed the events; here, I would like to focus on two of them: Yu Yi and Dai Yan Chang (Zheng Di'en). It seems not coincidental that Yu Yi was the advertiser for the July 14 Chinese movie exhibition, which noted that the three movies were brought from the mainland "by President Lincoln," the steamship running between San Francisco and Shanghai via Honolulu, Kobe, and Hong Kong, as well as the ship on which James Yen arrived and departed from

Honolulu³¹). There is still further research needed regarding this event; however, it is quite possible that these movies were brought in association with Yen's visit to Honolulu. (With support from the Shanghai YMCA, Yen was the leading person who utilized magic lantern slides as educational visual aids).

Dai Yan Chang is the more significant person appearing on the list of donation campaign members supporting James Yen, since he was the manager of the Park Theatre, the only movie house in a country outside Asia that was part of United Exchange's film network. Dr. Dai Yan Chang was well known as a successful Chinese immigrant (Fig. 3). He was a wealthy dentist, and influential in the Chinese community in Hawaii, dedicating himself to the activities of the United Chinese Society (*Zhonghua huiguan*, an association known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in other cities) for many years, as well as the owner of the Park Theatre, a representative movie house in Hawaii, which has exhibited both Chinese (regardless of Shanghai origin or Canton / Hong Kong origin) and American movies since the 1920s. My hypothesis is that the 1925 movie screenings demonstrated that Chinese movies could be a useful modern tool reflecting the reality of the homeland, and be beneficial to understanding the status quo in the homeland. This led Dai Yen Chang, a young successful Honolulu-born Chinese immigrant with ambitions to promote social reform in the homeland to take



Fig. 3 Portrait of Dai Yen Chang,
New China Press, August 28, 1928

over the Park Theatre and renovate it as a movie house in alliance with United Exchange.

5 Chinese Movies at Park Theatre: Watching Movies, Learning about the Homeland

On February 14, on the third page of *New China Press* which was usually filled with important news from inside and outside Honolulu, there appeared an advertisement for the Park Theatre (Fig. 4). The advertisement stated that the theater had started to screen Chinese movies considered beneficial for the Chinese population of Honolulu. *Reconciliation* (*Konggulan*, produced by the Star Motion Picture Company), known as the Chinese movie which brought in epoch-making box office revenues both inside China and among Chinese immigrant communities around the world, was selected as the opening film. It is strange that there was no mention of the relationship between the theater and United Exchange; instead, Dai Yen Chang, the theater's owner, stated on the advertisement that he "selected high quality

快來 快來 快來
請看祖國著名電影
空谷蘭

啟者本院主人因檢閱初攝攝國產視覽特由祖國挑選上等影畫寄來開演以供僑胞公餘之消遣神妙送演美人計及水滸傳各片實萬萬目者莫不謂得未曾有嘆觀止焉茲又想到轟傳一時之空谷蘭名片前部充為大雅可觀戲片共分十大幕有三大大特色

(一)編劇者之匠心獨運情節離奇 (二)演劇者之悲歡離合表演傳神 (三)放映者之光線適合畫片玲瓏加印磁針薄俗有益人羣實具有社會教育之精神非以怡娛目目是長也誠空前之傑作我僑胞思必以先觀為快也準於二月十八十九二十等夜開演遠望有興諸君速往幸勿失機會

開演時間
禮拜六及禮拜晚分兩場禮拜六六點半場八點半鐘
禮拜一晚不分上下場演一場準七點十五分放映
禮拜六日場準下午一點半場演一二次夜場六點半八點半
禮拜六即十八號日場水滸傳之一大破齊高州十木加橋蔣介石結婚一末共十一本夜場演空谷蘭前編十大本

入場價目
夜場 對號位六毫 頭等位五毫 二等位四毫
日場 大人三毫 小童二毫 及一毫

民國十七年二月十四號
公園影戲院即亞瑪刺拍賣院啟

PARK THEATRE
券贈奉
凡剪下此券持來本院觀
空谷蘭
●不論何日座五毫位者散收三毫
▲夜場 二月十九號上下場
十八號上下場
二十號一場
院戲影園公
(報國中)

Fig. 4 The first advertisement for Park Theatre after its renovation by Dai Yen Chang, *New China Press*, February 14, 1928

Chinese movies with the purpose of the recovery of Chinese sovereignty and the promotion of China-made products, as well as for supplying entertainment to overseas Chinese.”³²⁾ The uniqueness of the advertisement was that it included a brief critique of *Reconciliation* which intentionally utilized the fixed form for movie critiques popular in contemporary Shanghai, by pointing out three of the movie’s highlights: its ingenious story telling, the high level performances by the actors and actresses, and the skillfulness of the cinematography. The critique concluded that the movie “sharply criticizes society and is helpful for the world, and simultaneously has a spirit of social education.” The theater’s inexpensive admission fee also showed that exhibiting Chinese movies was, more or less, a non-profit purpose: admission remained only sixty cents for a first class box seat at night, and thirty cents for the most expensive matinee.

After *Reconciliation*’s two week screening, Park Theatre continued to present Chinese movies: *White Mallow* (*Bai furong*, produced by the Hwajet Film Company in 1927), *The Wang Family’s Four* (*Wangshi si xia*, the Dazhonghuabaihe Company’s 1927 smash hit), *Imperial Concubine Yang* (*Yanguifei* produced by the Shanghai Photoplay Company in 1927), and *Hero without Name* (*Wuming yingxiong*, an action movie shot by the Star Motion Picture Company in 1926). Due to the lack of many volumes of the *New China Press* from 1928 to 1929, it is difficult to uncover a detailed schedule of the Chinese movies distributed by United Exchange to the theater. However it is clear that the Chinese movie market in Honolulu was not cultivated merely for United Exchange’s commercial purposes; more specifically, this market was established from the perspective of the Chinese immigrant society, for the formation of a multicultural identity with ties to modern China. The space created by the theater was barely the venue the Chinese moviegoers shared the nostalgic memories of the homeland where most of

them had never seen before; rather, it was the space where enabled them to shape the noble and modern image of the homeland and served them to establish the multicultural identity as American citizen.

6 Conclusion

Unlike in Southeast Asia, exporting Chinese movies to Honolulu and San Francisco during the 1920s was not, on the whole, successful. The market in those cities was critically limited and, more importantly, the immigrant communities in North America and Hawaii were mentally much more separate from the homeland compared with those in Singapore and other Southeast Asian Chinese communities. For immigrants in North America and Hawaii, watching movies from the homeland was not immediately about identifying themselves as a part of China; on the contrary, immigrants became the part of the American multicultural community by watching Chinese movies. From this perspective, United Exchange's film distribution network was an apparatus for both establishing immigrants' novel and multi-layered identities, as well as showing mainlanders' pride in their commercial strength in the field of "*dianying*," entertainment for enlightenment in the new era.

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Note

- 1) See Yoshino Sugawara, Cross-border growth of Chinese film markets: Expansion into Singapore during the 1920s, *Modern China* [*Gendai Chūgoku*], No. 85, (Sept, 2011), 59-60.
- 2) The following article offers an empirical and critical study of United Exchange and

- the company's roles: Yoshino Sugawara, Liuhe (United Six) film company revisited, in Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (ed.), *Rethinking Chinese Film Industry: New Histories New Methods*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 95-120.
- 3) H. Mark Lai, *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Rowman, MD: Altamira, 2004), note #61 of page 306.
 - 4) Adam Mckeown has employed demographic analysis to study the population and the age / sex distributions in Hawaii during the late 19th century to the early 20th century and has pointed out that the Chinese immigrant community in Hawaii was distinguished from that in San Francisco in terms of economic success as well as the relatively higher social status brought by success in the plantation business. See Mckeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 26-43. Further, New York's Chinese community was smaller than both those in San Francisco nor Honolulu. According to Jingyi Song, there were around 8,000 Chinese immigrants in New York in 1930 (see Song, *Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity: New York's Chinese during the Depression and World War II* (Lexington books, 2010), 35), and there was only a single movie house where Chinese movies were played: the Chattam.
 - 5) See Ren Jinpin, "Talking about Chinese film industry [*Lun Zongguo yingxi shiye*]," *Shenbao*, January 5, 1928.
 - 6) Also See Sugawara, Liuhe. (United Six) film company revisited, 109.
 - 7) See Sugawara, Cross-border growth of Chinese film markets: Expansion into Singapore during the 1920s, 64. Sugawara examines the exhibition of Chinese movies in Singapore during the 1920s, and also points out that there were several large-scale film theaters in Singapore during the early thirties, including the Capitol with 1,650 seats, the Alhambra with 1,200 seats, and the Pavilion with 900 seats.
 - 8) 'The advertisement of United Exchange,' *Shenbao*, June 26, 1926.
 - 9) Ren Jinpin, op. cit.. The box office revenue for a Chinese film from Southeastern Asian cities, including British and Dutch colonies, Philippine, Vietnam, and Thailand, was estimated at about seven thousand *yuan*, which exceeded the total box office from cities inside China, which was about six thousand and five hundred *yuan*.
 - 10) The English title of the movie is referred to in "The list of Chinese feature films" in Cheng Shuren (ed.), *China Cinema Year Book 1927* (Zhonghua yingye nianjian she, 1927), section 4, page 39.
 - 11) "The frontrunner of exporting Chinese movies to United States [*Zhongguo yingpian yunwang Meiguo zhi xiansheng*]," *Shenbao*, October 14, 1923.
 - 12) Chinese new movie will be exhibited again [*You you huaren xin huapian kaiyan*], *Chun Sai Yat Po*, April 23, 1926.

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- 13) The film featured Anna May Won and was exhibited commercially at Capitol Theatre in Chinatown. See “The day of exhibiting *Xue Pinggui* was decided [*Xue Pinggui huapian dingqi kaiyan*]”, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, February 9, 1926; The advertisement by Capital Theatre, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, February 17, 1926; New movie will be exhibited in San Francisco [*Xin huapian zai huabu kaiyan*]”, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, February 20, 1926.
- 14) “YMCA invited Liu Zhaoming for the lecture [*Qingnianhui qing Liu Zhaoming yanjian*]”, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, June 2, 1927.
- 15) “Exhibiting news films shoot in the homeland at today and tomorrow nights [*Jinming liang wan zai ying zuguo shishihua*]”, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, June 18, 1927.
- 16) “Shanghai Great Wall Film Company’s advertisement for expanding stockd [*Shanghai Changcheng huapian gongsi kuochong zhaogu qishi*]”, *Chun Sai Yat Po*, August 8, 1927. The advertisement was appered intermittently until September 3 of 1927.
- 17) Li Wenguang, Li Zeyuan, Mei Xuetao, Cheng Peilin and Liu Zhaoming were students or employees at various schools and firms in the United States. See *China Film Year Book*, op. cit., section 24, page 5. Mei Xuetao and Cheng Peilin were supposed to study at the New York Institute of Photography; however, “Unfortunately, the school has changed ownership and locations a number of times” since its founding in 1910 and they “no longer have any student records that go back that far,” according to their reply to my inquiry through e-mail, on July 20, 2010.
- 18) See *China Film Year Book*, op. cit., section 3, page 28.
- 19) Chen Yong, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943: A Trans-pacific Community* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 196.
- 20) Chen Yong, op.cit., 197. The “*Chinese Times*” is also known as *Jinshan shibao* in Mandarin pronunciation.
- 21) McKeown, op. cit., 224.
- 22) McKeown, op. cit., 225.
- 23) Among the steamship companies which ran through the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and the American Mail Line were well known companies that connected San Francisco to Shanghai, via Honolulu, Japan, and Hong Kong.
- 24) Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu, HI: Hawaii Chinese History Center and The University Press of Hawaii, 1980), 140.
- 25) No literature has been found regarding this theater except a small article with a picture of the theater in *Theatres in Hawaii*, published by Lowell Angell (see Angel, *Theatres in Hawai’i*, (Charleston, SC: Arcaia Pub., 2011), 28). Even though the article doesn’t indicate the name of the theater, it is clear from the picture that the sign board reads, in Chinese characters, “*Li Cheng Xiyuan*,” namely “Li Cheng Theatre.” Li Cheng seems to be the name of the theater’s owner. According to Angel, the theater was

- later renovated as *Honolulu-za*, a Japanese movie house, and run, until 1939 when the showing of Japanese movies was prohibited.
- 26) According to this advertisement, *The Prodigal Son Redeemed* (*Lianhua luo*) by Commercial Press had been previously shown; however, I have not found any newspaper articles regarding this previous exhibition of Chinese movies.
- 27) “Homeland movies will be exhibited tonight [*Jinwan kaiyan zuguo dianying*],” *New China Press*, January 3, 1925.
- 28) The earliest example of the usage of “*dianying*” in *Chun Sai Yat Po*, according to my research, was an article that appeared on February 2, 1929, titled “A news from the Chinese YMCA: A family entertainment [*Zhonghua qingnianhui xiaoxi jiating tongle hui*].”
- 29) The English title of *Zhaixing zhi nü* was referred to in the *China Film Year Book*, section 4, page 37.
- 30) “The Chinese immigrants community in Honolulu will hold an event for collecting donations to support the great movement of mass education in the homeland [*Tanshan huaqiao kai mujuan dahui cujin zuguo pinmin jiaoyu dayundong*],” *New China Press*, July 23, 1925.
- 31) James Yen advertised in *New China Press* to show his gratitude for supporters in Honolulu; in the article he also noted that he left Honolulu on July 31 on the President Lincoln. See James Yen, “Appreciation for friends of Chinese immigrants for promoting donation campaign regarding mass education in homeland [*Wei cujin zuguo pinmin jiaoyu choukuan daoxie qiaobao*],” *New China Press*, August 4, 1925.
- 32) ‘The advertisement of Park Theatre,’ *New China Press*, February 14, 1928.

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