

# Between the national and the transnational: Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko and pan-Asianism

Li Xianglan, nicknamed 'the Manchurian orchid', was actually a Japanese actress named Yamaguchi Yoshiko, who had several names at different stages in her life. Her shape-shifting names are symptomatic and constitutive of her legendary and controversial life shaped by her tumultuous times: here I examine Yamaguchi/Li's wartime double identity as a Japanese national born and raised in 1920s northeast China and a Chinese starring in a number of Japanese films, as well as her postwar 'afterlife'.

Yiman Wang

The lingering controversy over Li Xianglan for over half a century signals our unaccomplished task of coming to terms with her ambivalent historical legacy. My task here is to reassess the ramifications of her 'theater of identity' (Robinson 1994:716) and to emphasize the dialectical relationship between national affiliations and transnational mobility, both during and after the period of Japanese colonialism.

In her most intriguing essay, Shelley Stephenson argues that Yamaguchi failed to continue her wartime success as Li Xianglan after 1945 because she became reified as a Japanese. '...Yamaguchi's movement re-inscribes the boundaries between screen, off-screen, nation, and race, as firmly as these boundaries were once blurred in the elusive career of Li Xianglan' (Stephenson 2002:12). Stephenson is correct to point out that the concept of nation was in flux during wartime. This, however, does not mean that concern with nation was lacking - both Japan and China in the 1930s and 40s vigorously championed nation-building projects, albeit with very different motivations and stakes. It is therefore crucial to politicize and historicize Li Xianglan's pan-East-Asian mobility within the context of nation/empire-building. I argue that Li's wartime success was premised upon her performative suturing into variant national, ethnic imaginaries, as much as it suggested her pan-East Asian mobility; that is, the national and the transnational are mutually constitutive, not contradictory.

## Wartime 'Manchurian Orchid'

The rise of Li Xianglan as a star in the mid-late 1930s was directly linked to Japan's colonial policy in Manchukuo, China, Taiwan and other East and Southeast Asian countries. The colonial climax, the expansionist project of the 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' between 1940 and 1945, coincided with Li's pan-East Asian stardom. Li became 'a representative worthy of the name 'Happy Asia' (xing ya)' (Stephenson 1999:241).

Li's Manchukuo-Japan films, or the 'Chinese continental friendship films' include *The Song of White Orchid* (dir. Kuio Watanabe 1939), *China Night* (Osamu Fushmitzu 1940), *Suzhou Night* (Hiromasa Nomura 1941) and *Winter Jasmine* (Yasushi Sasaki 1942). In these melodramatic narratives, Li routinely plays a young Chinese woman falling in love with a Japanese man (a doctor, clerk, or soldier). The new emotional allegiance parallels her linguistic shift from Chinese to Japanese, in speaking and singing. The political agenda of expansionism and assimilationism was packaged in the form of depoliticized, sentimentalized romance which, combined with Li's musical interludes, won her pan-East Asian appeal. Such films structurally excluded national borders by naturalizing political and gender hierarchies; the hierarchies nonetheless remained indelible. Li's border-crossing trajectories on and off screen are thus rifted and problematic, as much as they are made out to be smooth and successful in publicity writings and film diegeses. The importance of the national divide is illustrated in an incident that Li narrated in her autobiography.

When studying at a Beijing high school under the Chinese name Pan Shuhua, Li once attended a students' meeting where each had to express how he/she would fight the invading Japanese army. Her contribution, Li said, would be to stand on the Great Wall and be shot by either side. The image of standing on the Great Wall, which the ancient Chinese empire erected to ward off the Other, functions as a powerful trope for the ambivalent valences of border-crossing. While it may contain a de-territorializing, utopic vision, it also entails the risk of being disowned and victimized by both sides. Li's transnational position thus assumes the persistence of borders as well as political and cultural investment in them, made more significant as

nation-states were still in the making in wartime China, Japan, and other parts of East and Southeast Asia.

The Chinese audience's reconstruction of Li as Manchurian/Chinese suggests their awareness of the importance of the national divide. By refusing to acknowledge her Japanese nationality (Yamaguchi and Sakuya 1989:232), thus disavowing her 'enemy' quality, the audience tried to keep the popular star on their side. By cultivating the star's 'fictive ethnicity' (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991:49), the Chinese audience sought to construct an imaginary nationhood. The sign of 'Li Xianglan' did not simply facilitate Japanese cultural propaganda, but enabled the Chinese audience to stake their cultural-political claims.

## Postwar 'cultural traitor', diplomat

Efforts to mobilize and code 'Li Xianglan' continued beyond her repatriation in 1945 and 1946. As she was able to prove her Japanese nationality - thus evading the label of *hanjian* which by definition referred to *Chinese* (Han) collaborators -

## Encore Li Xianglan

Li's political and entertainment value underwent further re-signification during the 1980s and 90s, when her wartime love songs were re-released as part of the nostalgic reconstruction of pre-1949 Republican Shanghai that swept post-socialist China and post-colonial Hong Kong alike. Two major works rehearsed Li's legendary life: the musical *Li Xianglan* and the four-episode TV show *Sayonara Ri Ko-ran* (*Bie'le, Li Xianglan*), both appearing in the early 1990s and adapted from her autobiography. The Japanese musical was staged fifteen times in Beijing, Changchun, Shenyang, and Dalian to a Chinese audience of twenty thousand. The musical attributed Li's repatriation not simply to her Japanese nationality, but to the Oriental virtue of repaying hatred with benevolence (*Yide baoyuan*), the same virtue said to underlie the restoration of the Sino-Japanese diplomatic relationship.

Deviating from the political gloss, the China-Japan co-produced TV show *Sayonara Ri Ko-ran* ends in a most ironic moment: the Japanese ship is slowly pulling away from Shanghai with Li and other repatriated Japanese on board, when Li's famous song 'Yelai xiang' (Night fragrance) is aired by the Shanghai People's Radio Station. Swayed by her own voice, an emotional Li bids farewell to China and to 'my Li Xianglan'. The title 'Sayonara Ri Ko-ran' thus shifts from the Chinese audience's perspective (bidding farewell to one of its favorite wartime stars) to hers (bidding farewell to her now former self). The irreversible change from past glory to present guilt and humiliation, from Li Xianglan to Yamaguchi Yoshiko, however, is compromised by the persistence of her singing that supposedly belongs to the past. The return of her voice uncannily suggests her omnipresence in ordinary Chinese urbanites' lives - so much so that the disavowal of her complicity is hardly sufficient to dispel her 'cultural capital'.

My analysis demonstrates that Li's transnational mobility ultimately hinges upon the national divide. Given her built-in dual identity and the historical moment when she began her singing and acting career, Li served and continues to serve as a privileged embodiment of national politics as well as transnational fantasy. With trans-nationalism and globalization becoming our contemporary catchphrases, national politics that ultimately weighed down Li's transnational mobility are, perhaps, escaping our radar. My goal, therefore, is to reassess the role national politics plays in both producing and constraining trans-nationality - a dialectic Li has lived out her entire life. <

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Yiman Wang is currently a Global Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor at International Institute, UCLA. Her research and teaching interests include early cinema, transnational Chinese cinemas, and film remakes.

yw3@alumni.duke.edu



Yamaguchi Yoshiko playing a Japanese girl, the adopted daughter of a male Russian opera singer, singing 'My Nightingale' in Russian. The still is from the Toho-Man'ei production *My Nightingale* (directed by Shimazu Yasujiro, 1943).

Li was chastised as a cultural traitor, a living embodiment of guilt and remorse. The postwar suppression of *hanjian* launched by the Chiang Kai-shek-led Kuomintang (KMT) government aimed to isolate and cleanse the Other, to reclaim territorial control and reinforce the boundary between victorious China and defeated Japan. If Li Xianglan's wartime pan-East Asian appeal ostensibly erased national conflicts, her postwar repatriation and degradation brought ever-existent national boundaries back to the foreground.

After more than three decades' hiatus, the sign of 'Li Xianglan' re-entered the spotlight in the theater of the Sino-Japanese relationship. Her visit to China in 1978 allowed Chinese people to witness her deep-felt guilt for 'deceiving' them during the war, and to accept her profuse apologies. Once again 'Li Xianglan', the name and the body, had to bear the crimes that Japan's militarist government committed in East and Southeast Asia, and to convey the sincere apology that 'her' government owed to its ex-colonies. Only this time, her apology served to facilitate the establishment of Sino-Japanese diplomacy. The cultural 'traitor' thus became a cultural 'diplomat', yet another figure who traverses borders to better serve nation-oriented interests.