Epilogue

Toward a Glocal Viewing Public

It was 29 April 1938, Japanese Emperor Hirohito’s birthday. Outside a building in Hankou, several Chinese men were looking up into the sky, watching Chinese fighter planes shooting at the Japanese bombers that were attacking the city. This moment was captured by the camera of the famous combat photographer Robert Capa (1913–1954) (Fig. 1). Capa most likely did not pay any attention to the wall in the background; there was a movie poster for Konggu lan, the Mingxing film that was showing at the time at a local theater, the Grand Mingxing Theater (Mingxing da xiyuan 明星大戏院). I was thrilled by my coincidental discovery of this photo. The photo reminds us of how ignorant we are of the life trajectories of the films discussed in this book. Their ‘life stories’ must have been more colorful and complicated than we imagine. This photo also points to the fact that the power of Shanghai filmmaking transcended the territorial boundary of Shanghai and reached a glocal viewing public. The epilogue provides a preliminary look at the places where Mingxing films arrived and the ways in which Shanghai filmmaking disseminated these new forms of visuality, melodramatic storytelling, and isms.

The film market expanded quickly in China starting in the mid-1920s. As discussed in the Introduction, motion pictures were still in their infancy in the early 1920s when Mingxing was founded. There were only a dozen movie theaters in Shanghai in 1922, but the number climbed to 26 in 1927 and 53 in 1930.¹ In the whole of China there were about 106 movie theatres in eighteen cities in 1927.² In 1930 the number soared to 233 (distributed in 24 Chinese cities), and in 1935 there were 276 cinemas in seventy towns and cities.³ A large number of these theaters were concentrated in a few centers, including Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing, Hankou, and Hong Kong.⁴ Chinese films were also

³ Way, Motion pictures in China, 4; Rudolf Löwenthal, “The present status of the film in China,” 83.
⁴ According to E. I. Way, 7 of the 24 cities (Shanghai, Dairen, Harbin, Tianjin, Hankou, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou) had 62 per cent of all the theaters in China. See Way, Motion pictures in China, 4. According to Löwenthal, Shanghai, Tianjin, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Beijing, Hankou and Qingdao disposed of 106 theaters or more than 44 per cent of the total number. See Löwenthal, “The present status of the film in China,” 549.
screened to overseas Chinese audiences in as many as one or two hundred cinemas in Southeast Asia, Australia and America.⁵

How many of these places did Mingxing films reach? We learned in Chapter One that its earliest comedies and Zhang Xinsheng were distributed to Nanjing, Beijing, Tianjin, Dalian, Hankou, and Ji’nan. As for the 1924 film Jade, it was reported that five prints were produced. One was shipped to Beijing and Tianjin for screenings at the Carlton Theaters, three were sold to the Philippines, Vietnam, and northeast China, and one was reserved for Shanghai theaters.⁶

These scraps of information suggest that early Mingxing films were distributed chiefly to five regions: (1) Shanghai and surrounding cities and towns in the lower Yangtze Delta (Suzhou, Nanjing, etc.); (2) Beijing, Tianjin and several treaty port cities in the north (Qingdao, Dalian, and Yantai); (3) Hankou and its vicinity in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River; (4) northeast China/Manchuria (e.g. Harbin); and (5) Southeast Asia (Nanyang).

The founding of the Liuhe Distribution Company in 1926 strengthened and expanded distribution networks in these regions. Its North China office

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⁵ These regions included “the Philippines, French Indo-China, Siam, the Straits Settlements, the Malay States, Java, Australia, Panama and America.” See Löwenthal, 83–85.