Nien Sön Ling and Beyond: Tracing Asian Presence in German Silent Cinema

As one of the Collegium members at the 43rd Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto, the week-long screenings profoundly deepened my understanding of the extraordinary transnationality and mobility of early cinema. When thinking of such mobility, most people immediately recall Anna May Wong, who dazzled on the silver screen of Teatro Verdi multiple times last year. Yet, few may have noticed that another Chinese male actor appeared twice as an important supporting character in Pordenone that same year. After one of the Collegium lectures, I had a conversation with Anke Mebold, an archivist at the Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, who revealed his name: Nien Sön Ling. Mebold mentioned that Ling, a Chinese actor, frequently appeared in Weimar-era German films. However, little is known about his history, and scholarly research on him remains scarce.

I was immediately intrigued by Ling and seized the opportunity to explore the contributions of several prominent Asian actors in German Silent cinema—particularly during the Weimar period—beginning with Nien Sön Ling and his roles in *Dagfin* (1926) and *Pavement Butterfly* (1929). My inquiry also extended to Nien Tso Ling (likely an older relative of Ling), Henry Sze (one of the earliest Chinese actors in German cinema), and Grace Chiang-Metzner (the wife of Ernö Metzner, who also appeared at Giornate twice). This article serves as both a preliminary summary and a reflection on my experiences in Pordenone while also addressing the need for early film historiography to pay greater attention to non-native actors like Nien Sön Ling in Western cinema.

Who is Nien Sön Ling?

Neither *Dagfin* nor *Pavement Butterfly* marked Nien Sön Ling's first appearance at Giornate. Ling debuted in Pordenone in 2002, in the "Out of Frame – Technical Wonders" section, with *Nachtgestalten* (1929).[1] Although he played only an unnamed supporting role, a production still available on FilmPortal clearly shows him interacting with Swedish actress Margit Manstad in one of the scenes. But beyond his roles as "Sekretär Garron" in *Dagfin*, "Mr. Wu" in *Pavement Butterfly*, and an unnamed extra in *Nachtgestalten*, who was Nien Sön Ling?

Fig. 1 "Szene mit Margit Manstad, Nien Sön Ling." *FilmPortal*.

Even now, I have not been able to uncover much information about Ling's early life. However, upon examining a portrait of him displayed on Wikipedia, I quickly recognized the Chinese characters of his signature in the upper right corner. His Chinese name is 林严训 (in simplified Chinese) or 林嚴訓 (in traditional Chinese), which would be rendered in modern pinyin as Lín Yánxùn. He was born in Zhejiang, China, in 1892. While the exact date of his arrival in Germany is difficult to determine, it is likely that he arrived before World War I. Considering his ancestral roots and the history of Chinese migration to Germany in the early 20th century, Ling may have been one of the traveling entertainers who moved to Germany after the German occupation of Jiaozhou, or perhaps a Zhejiang merchant who traveled overland to Europe during that period.[2] From *Die Herrin der Welt* (1919) to *Die barmherzige Lüge* (1939), Ling appeared in more than 30 films in Germany, making him arguably the most active Chinese actor on the German screen during that period.[3]

Fig. 2 Portrait of Nien Sön Ling. *Wikipedia*.

Die barmherzige Lüge was Ling's final film. After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, archival records on Ling once again became scarce. According to the *German Phone Directories, 1915–1981* database published by Ancestry, Ling resided at W 15 Ludwigkirchstr 7 in Berlin between 1938 and 1941.[4] However, the next time he reappears in archival records is on December 22, 1946, when he died of liver cancer at the *Städtisches Krankenhaus Kurfürstendamm* (Municipal Hospital Kurfürstendamm) located at Kurfürstendamm 57–58 in Berlin-Charlottenburg, at the age of 54.[5] His

last recorded address was Kurfürstendamm 66, not far from his previous residence and in close proximity to Berlin's Chinese enclave around Kantstraße at the time. Yet, during this period, how did Ling make a living after he could no longer work in film? Why did he choose to remain in Germany? And was he affected by Nazi Germany's widespread persecution and capture of Chinese nationals? These are critical questions that, for now, remain unanswered due to the limitations of available archival materials.

Ling's fate, however, undoubtedly reflects and represents the broader experiences of Chinese actors—and actors of color—living in Germany during that era. Yet, before delving into the shared experiences of these actors and the racial discrimination they endured, I would like to explain why I have chosen Ling as my primary case and focus. Ling's extensive acting career, which intersected with that of most prominent Chinese and other Asian actors in the German film industry at the time, including Anna May Wong, the Chinese American actress who sought opportunities across Europe and America, makes him a central figure whose experiences overlapped significantly with those of his contemporaries.

First, it is essential to mention Nien Tso Ling. Although there is no definitive evidence, the similarities in their names, appearances, and overlapping periods of activity suggest that Nien Tso Ling was likely a brother or an older relative of Nien Sön Ling. Given that most of Nien Tso Ling's work was concentrated between 1920 and 1923, with a final appearance in *Auf Leben und Tod* (1929), and considering the significant overlap in their filmographies, it is reasonable to speculate that Nien Tso Ling may have entered the film industry because of Nien Sön Ling.[6] Among the more than ten films in which Nien Tso Ling appeared, the most notable surviving work is *Die Insel der Verschollenen* (1921), an adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).[7] A version of the film is currently available for online viewing on YouTube through OLDTVMASTERS.[8] In this film, Nien Tso Ling portrays a character that typifies the stereotypical Asian male roles of the time: not only a henchman and assistant to the villain but also an opium addict.

However, there are no detailed records about Nien Tso Ling's later life, and his fate after 1929 remains a mystery. Since I have not found any records of his death, I speculate that, like many Chinese living in Germany at the time, he may have chosen to leave the country in the 1930s. If my speculation is correct, did Nien Tso Ling return to China or move to another country? Did he continue acting elsewhere? On a broader level, if it remains difficult to trace his life trajectory after 1929, an even more fundamental question arises: why did he and Nien Sön Ling leave Zhejiang for Germany, and what drew them to the world of cinema? These critical questions remain unanswered, primarily because Chinese actors, as people of color and immigrants, have been silenced within the dominant Western archival framework. Yet, it is precisely these difficult-to-answer questions that underscore the urgent need to re-examine marginalized communities in early cinema today.

Henry Sze was also among the earliest Chinese male actors to appear on the German screen. Although both he and Nien Sön Ling made their film debuts in Joe May's *Die Herrin der Welt* (1919) series, Sze appeared in four out of the eight parts as a major character, whereas Ling had a minor role only in

the first installment.[9] This disparity undoubtedly suggests that Sze was held in much higher regard by Joe May than Ling. While Sze's acting career, like that of Nien Tso Ling, was brief and concentrated within a short period, Sze belonged to a different demographic among the Chinese community in Germany at the time—one that was distinct from the two Lings, who were most likely from farming or merchant backgrounds. Sze was part of the intellectual class, a group that had privileged access to Western, modern education, which enabled him to leave behind his own voice.

In 1920, Sze published an article titled *Theater und Film in China* in the German magazine *Sport im Bild*. In this piece, he not only recounted how he came to Germany, was discovered by Joe May, and entered the film industry, but also offered a comparative reflection on stage design and acting styles between China and the West. Given that he was from Shanghai, one of the earliest regions in mainland China to embrace cinema, and demonstrated a clear familiarity with Chinese audiences' reception of film in his writing, I argue that he likely had exposure to cinema before leaving Shanghai to pursue his studies abroad.[10] Although this article was likely a response to the Chinese community's critique of the racist portrayals in *Die Herrin der Welt*, it undeniably allowed Sze to leave behind a historical record with a stronger sense of agency in the archives.

Fig. 3 Mia May and Henry Sze in *Die Herrin der Welt/Mistress of the World* (1919).

Grace Chiang represents the experience of Asian women actors during this period. She is no stranger to Giornate, having first appeared in 2015's "Italian Muscle in Germany" section, where she played a supporting role named "O-Nana-San" in *Der Unüberwindliche* (1928).[11] Although I have not been able to view the film, the character's name closely aligns with the Western stereotypes of Japanese

female names at the time. Moreover, U.S. naturalization records for her husband, Ernö Metzner, indicate that Grace Chiang was born in Kobe, Japan.[12] Therefore, despite her surname suggesting a typical Chinese origin and her later appearances in Chinese roles, she was most likely a Japanese actress. Chiang's work was showcased at Giornate for a second time in 2019 in the "Weimar Shorts" section with *Polizeibericht Überfall* (1928).[13] In this earlier work, however, she did not appear as an actress but contributed behind the scenes as the screenwriter of this milestone avant-garde film. It was likely during the filming of *Polizeibericht Überfall* that Chiang fell in love with director Ernö Metzner, and the two married on December 12, 1928, in Budapest, Hungary. Unfortunately, I have yet to find any contemporary press or magazine coverage acknowledging Chiang's contributions as a screenwriter to this film.

Photo: Hans Casparius

A new film by Erno Metzner. *Where's Love, There's Danger (Achtung, Lieve-Lebensgefahr).* Grace Chiang Metzner and Nien Son Ling.

Fig. 4 Chiang and Ling. *Close Up*.

After marrying Metzner, Chiang remained active in German cinema and witnessed—and participated in—the transition from silent to sound film. She appeared in *Melodie der Welt* (1929), often regarded as Germany's first full-length sound film, playing what was described as a "typical Japanese role (die charakteristische Rolle einer Japanerin)."[14] That same year, in 1929, Chiang collaborated with Nien Sön Ling in *Achtung! Liebe! Lebensgefahr!* (1929), directed by her husband. The two portrayed a Chinese father-daughter duo in supporting roles. Although the film was originally shot as a silent movie, by the time it was officially released in 1930, a dubbed version was produced in response to the widespread transition to sound. While the film received negative reviews from much of the German press, a review in the "Comment and Review" section of *Close Up* (November 1929) singled

out Chiang's performance as the highlight of the film. The reviewer even remarked that her acting "goes beyond" Lillian Gish's occasionally "a little too methodical" mannerisms. Furthermore, "[t]he arch concessions of Anna May Wong are shown up at their true value." Compared to her contemporaries, Chiang was said to "go among the Asta Nielsens, for her ability of expression has that purity that lacks all callowness or cant, to be found only among the chosen few."[15] However, by 1938, when Chiang filed her declaration of intention for U.S. naturalization, her occupation had shifted from actress to "housewife."[16] Although her husband, Metzner, continued to work as a production designer on several American films, Chiang never returned to the screen.

Although I have highlighted several Asian performers from Nien Sön Ling to Grace Chiang, whose careers followed different trajectories, they represent only a small fraction of the most active—or perhaps the most fortunate—Asian actors in German cinema during that period, and their backgrounds were largely concentrated in East Asia. In reality, German silent cinema also featured a wide range of other Asian and actors of color from diverse regions and ancestries. Most of these performers did not secure as many roles as Ling, leave behind subjective written records like Sze, or participate in behind-the-scenes production like Chiang. As a result, research on this broader community remains extremely limited. However, as Yiman Wang suggests in her work on Anna May Wong—not merely as a star of color, but also as a performer and a worker—the Asian acting community in early German cinema, exemplified by Nien Sön Ling, faced strikingly similar challenges. On one hand, the process of securing roles and the act of performing itself demanded both visible and invisible forms of labor. On the other, once filming was complete, these actors often faced resistance and criticism from within their own Asian communities.

"Echter Chinese"

In *Dagfin*, while the main antagonist, Türkischer General Sabi Bey, was portrayed by the German actor Paul Wegener, Nien Sön Ling appeared merely as his henchman.[17] This case suggests that the competition for roles faced by Asian actors in the German film industry at the time was not primarily with other Asian or actors of color, but with white actors. A 1920 publication titled *Film-magazin*, which compiled resumes and contact information of film industry professionals, reveals that many white actors explicitly highlighted their ability to portray "exotic" or orientalized characters in their profiles.[18] German actor Max Zilzer, for instance, described himself as "[s]pecialized in exotic characters: Chinese, Japanese, etc."[19] He further emphasized his approach and performance style, noting that "[t]he latter portrayed through expressive facial acting without masks."

Beyond Zilzer, other white actors listed in the same directory, such as Paul Rehkopf, Maryla von Orlit, Maria Forescu and Karl A. Römer,[20] also mentioned their proficiency in playing "Orientalische" or "exotische Figuren," and many had experience portraying Asian roles. For example, Römer played a Japanese character in *Tötendes Schweigen* (1920), in which he starred alongside Ling. His performance was praised by *Der Kinematograph* (August 1920) as one that "looked absolutely genuine in his acting and make-up and took on the unsympathetic role with tact."[21] Ling, however,

received only a brief, dismissive mention in the same review, without even being named: “A few genuine Chinese added an exotic touch.”[22]

“Exotische Figuren” may have been just one of many character types that white European actors specialized in, but for most Asian actors, these roles were often the only available option. Consequently, Asian actors had no choice but to confront this challenge from European white actors and the film industry as a whole, and they were forced to accept the underlying racist logic embedded in this dynamic. Moreover, to gain an advantage in this competition, Asian actors were compelled to reinforce Western stereotypes of people of color. Henry Sze exemplified a more subtle approach by merely describing himself as skilled in “Exotische Charakterrollen” (exotic character roles).[23] In contrast, the mixed-race actress Mabel May-Yong and Nien Sön Ling were more direct.

Mabel May-Yong’s strategy was particularly clever. As a mixed-race actress with both white and Asian heritage—and with features that leaned more toward a white appearance—she did not use her real name when entering the film industry. Instead, she adopted an exotic, orientalized stage name. This kind of name politics was not uncommon in the German film industry of the time.[24] Although Mabel May-Yong’s actions reflect more complex questions of identity (for instance, while she had Asian ancestry, her white appearance and upbringing complicate whether her name strategy was a survival tactic or an encroachment on the limited space available to Asian actors), I am, for here, considering her as part of the broader Asian acting community.

Ling’s listing in *Film-Magazin* provides the clearest illustration of how Chinese actors competed with local German actors. He appeared twice in the publication—once in the main section for actors under the name “Ling Niensön” and again in the appendix as “Nien Sön Ling.”[25] In the first listing, Ling used a portrait that perfectly conformed to Western stereotypes of Chinese men. He is depicted crouching on the ground, wearing a traditional Chinese long robe and jacket, with a solemn expression. His right hand strokes the head of a dog, while his left hand holds a document that the dog is biting. In the second listing, featured in the appendix, Ling’s name is presented as “Nien Sön Ling,” and the portrait is replaced with a medium close-up frontal shot that includes his Chinese signature in the upper right corner.[26] Despite the differences in name and portrait, the text in both entries is nearly identical. His self-description is succinct yet powerful: “Echter Chinese mit eigenen Kostümen – Vermittler und Dolmetscher,” which translates to “Real Chinese with his own costumes – mediator and interpreter.”

This statement, though brief, effectively highlights Ling’s competitive advantages. First, his racial identity ensured that his physical appearance aligned with the audience’s expectations, offering a supposedly more “authentic” portrayal of Asian characters on screen. Second, his ability to provide his own costumes and serve as both a mediator and interpreter suggested that hiring Ling would be a more cost-effective option. In essence, Ling was positioning himself as a cheaper labor alternative to his white competitors, leveraging the promise of future labor to secure roles. In the same directory, another Asian figure appeared—not as an actor, but as a technician involved in the production of “orientalische Filme”: Sattar Kheiri from Delhi, India.[27] However, Ling’s personal background prevented him from pursuing a similar technical career, leaving him with no choice but to exchange

greater labor for opportunities. It was likely this relentless attitude and the unseen labor behind the scenes that enabled Ling to become one of the most frequently appearing and longest-working Asian actors in German cinema during that era. By the time Ling appeared in his final film, *Die barmherzige Lüge* (1939), he had also assumed the position of Consultant.[28] This undoubtedly reflects Ling's dedication and intelligence, and it further demonstrates that through the repetitive portrayal of nameless characters, Ling ultimately became an expert capable of advising on the filmmaking process.

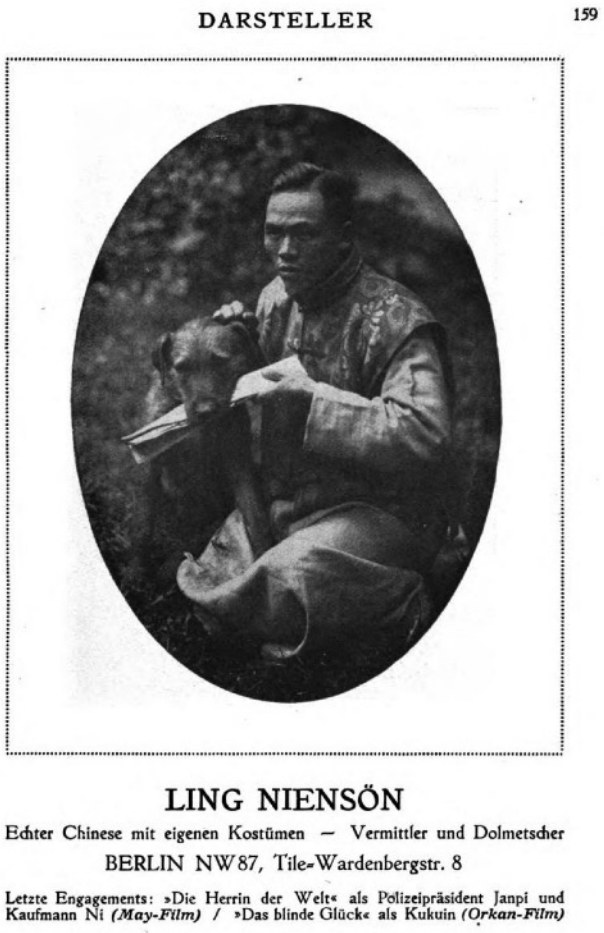

Fig. 5 Ling's First Listing in *Film-magazin* (1920).

Although Ling was one of the most well-known Asian actors in the German film industry at the time, the additional labor he invested—and the psychological struggles he may have endured before committing to that labor—cannot be erased by a few words of praise from contemporary white film critics.[29] Moreover, for Asian actors like Ling, the completion of filming rarely marked the end of their work. Asian actors, particularly Chinese actors, often faced criticism from the Chinese community in Germany over the roles they portrayed. As mentioned earlier in the section on Henry Sze, his published article may have been a response to the discontent among Chinese communities in

Germany regarding the racist narratives in *Die Herrin der Welt*. During that period, this dissatisfaction —particularly among Chinese intellectuals, including students and journalists—prompted the Chinese Students' Association in Germany to issue what is likely the first anti-racist critique of German cinema written by people of color.[30] The discourse sparked by *Die Herrin der Welt* and the subsequent decade of protests from the Chinese community in Germany eventually escalated into an international diplomatic incident between China and Germany.[31]

However, if we return to the perspective of Asian actors at this point, it becomes evident that little had changed in their circumstances. Take Ling as an example—whether it was the nameless Chinese character in *Die Herrin der Wel*t, the "Sekretär Garron" who served the evil general in *Dagfin*, the ill-fated "Mr. Wu" who dies early to propel the narrative in *Pavement Butterfly*, or the "Mongolischer Diener Veras" in his final film, *Die barmherzige Lüge*—the roles Ling portrayed never strayed from Western imaginations and stereotypes of Asians. Although we can retrospectively analyze his performances to restore a sense of agency to Ling, the reality remains that both on and off-screen—whether as a performer of color or as a marginalized side within the Chinese community in Germany —Ling was ultimately in a state of both powerlessness and voicelessness. Moreover, during this period, anti-racist actions by fellow Asians may have inadvertently reduced performance opportunities for Asian performers like Ling—or, at the very least, required them to expend even more labor to secure roles they might otherwise have obtained.

It is important to note that due to the limitations of available archival sources, much of the content presented here has relied on methods of speculative historiography. Highlighting the potential impact that the actions of Chinese intellectuals in Germany may have had on Asian performers during this period is not intended as a critique, but rather as an attempt to restore the voices of these Asian performers, whose voices have been largely absent from the written archival records. Additionally, the preliminary archival research for this study has been primarily based on German-language sources accessible online, which are relatively limited. If the opportunity arises for in-person archival research, many of the speculative questions raised in this paper could potentially be resolved, and some of the materials I have encountered in secondary sources but have been unable to verify could be confirmed. Moreover, as I do not have any formal training in German, my interpretation of the original archival materials has relied heavily on translation software, which may have introduced certain inaccuracies.

However, in such a historically complex and underexplored context, I believe it is both the right time and a necessary endeavor to re-examine the overlooked communities of actors of color in Western film history. While not every one of these actors had a life as dramatic or as well-documented as Anna May Wong, viewing them collectively, as a community, offers a more accurate reflection of their prolonged silence and the injustices they endured, beginning in the silent film era. Now is the ideal moment to embark on this work—not only because the past decade has seen significant advancements in digitization and greater access to international archives online, but also because we—whether as archivists or historians—are constantly confronted with decisions about the selection of historical materials and the prioritization of research efforts. As someone from the Global South, my time in

Pordenone has been a continuous and profound reminder that the present moment is perhaps the best opportunity to rediscover and reinterpret film history and historiography, and perhaps the final chance to rescue endangered archival materials. It was also my experience attending lectures and engaging in conversations as a collegian that guided me in the completion of this article. I hope that this still-to-be-completed research has, in some small way, recovered fragments of a past that might otherwise have been lost—and that it might also inspire similar efforts within the Giornate community.

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[19] *Film-magazin.* Berlin: Kühn, 1920, 16. The original German text reads: “Spezialität in exotischen Figuren: Chinesen, Japaner usw.”

[20] *Film-magazin.* Berlin: Kühn, 1920. Paul Rehkopf, 20; Maryla von Orlit, 27; Maria Forescu, 30; Karl A. Römer, 501.

[21] "Berliner Filmneuheiten." *Der Kinematograph* (August 1920). The original German text reads: "[…] der in Spiel und Maske absolut echt wirkte und sich der unsympathischen Rolle mit Takt annahm." Accessed March 31, 2025. https://archive.org/details/kinematograph-1920-08/page/n143/mode/1up?view=theater.

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[23] *Film-magazin.* Berlin: Kühn, 1920, 125.

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[25] *Film-magazin.* Berlin: Kühn, 1920, 159, 526.

[26] The portrait mentioned here corresponds to Fig. 2 in the text.

[27] *Film-magazin.* Berlin: Kühn, 1920, 159, 551.

[28] Filmportal.de. "Die barmherzige Lüge." Accessed March 31, 2025. https://www.filmportal.de/en/movie/die-barmherzige-luge_ea43d4a69b8c5006e03053d50b37753d

[29] Ling's performances were often praised by white film critics, though these reviews were usually brief. For instance, *Der Kinematograph* (December 1925) reviewed his performance in *Der Bastard* (1925), stating: "[…] und ausgezeichnet der Artist des Chinesen Nien Sön Ling, der, wie schon in früheren Filmen, wieder dar tat, daß er ein instinktsicherer, großen Aufgaben gewachsener Darsteller von Qualität ist." (Translation: "[…] and excellent was the performance of the Chinese artist Nien Sön Ling, who, as in earlier films, again demonstrated that he is an instinctive actor of great skill, capable of mastering demanding roles.")

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[31] Nagl. "1. Policing Race," 37.