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The Voice-Over as an Integrating Tool of Word and Image

The device of the voice-over has generally been examined and analyzed through its use in the cinema of the West, primarily Hollywood, as in the laudable works of Kozloff (1988), Chatman (1975; 1999), and Rascaroli (2008). In this article, I will examine the applications and functions of the voice-over in a classic Chinese film, *Xiaocheng zhi chun* (*Spring in a Small City*, 1948), directed by Fei Mu. The film, largely regarded as a masterpiece in Chinese cinema, represents a rare example of the use of voice-over in Chinese films of that period. I will go on to examine the voice-over in *Spring in a Small City* as a tool or device through which the filmmakers attempt to integrate words with images in the manner of certain poetic techniques in Chinese traditions.

Supposing the simplistic, yet useful (for the purpose of this essay) dichotomy of the Asian film versus Western cinema, the role of voice-over in alloying words and images in Asian films may be even more prominent because of the variety of languages in which the written word takes on both aural and visual significance. Due to the general unfamiliarity of the Western audience and scholarship with Asian languages, from their point of view, Asian films may be perceived to be more visual than aural. In such a biased judgment, the voice-over would seem a strange intervention in the visual scheme of things. Furthermore, although narrative and narration are intuitively and cognitively understood to be universal, the general misconception (even among some Asian scholars and critics) is that, unlike its Western counterpart, the use of voice-over is somehow alien to the cinematic modes of narration in Asia.

No empirical study has been made thus far to determine this hearsay as a fact, and I suspect that there is more generic use of the voice-over in Asian films, from Iran to Japan, than is otherwise believed. Asia's lack of appropriate film theories, sufficient empirical research, and a "voice" in the political sense can be attributed to this misconception. Furthermore, it is certainly the case that many contemporary Asian films employ voice-over, the most well-known

examples being a number of Wong Kar-Wai's films, including *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1994), and *Ashes of Time* (1994). The voice-over in Wong's films is used in a way that is more in accord with literary narratives; a strategy that we can also see in the voice-over narrations of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950) and *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). In this sense, Wong's films appear to fall into a more familiar line of Western narrative practices. However, if we view Wong's films as inheriting the narrative legacy of a classic Chinese film such as *Spring in a Small City*, we can then address an imbalance in the discourse on the voice-over created by the overwhelming tendency to equate the voice-over with the Western "voice."

The sense that voice-over in Asian cinema is somewhat muted can be also due to a Western standpoint that tries to apply its own general principles of narratology and "the language of cinema" to various artistic representations, which might have in fact been derived from more local concepts and traditions. Edward Branigan, in his book *Point of View in the Cinema*, essentially argues that narration "is not a person or state of mind, but a linguistic and logical relationship posed by the text as a condition of its intelligibility" (3). While noting that cinema as a language system has given rise to the debate over "the relation between words and pictures," Branigan points to the evidence of empirical studies demonstrating "the existence of two processing systems in the brain" that appear to strongly support "the notion that words and pictures do not entirely overlap (and thus neither can be posited as a master system)" (15). But what are the implications of such an improbability in the cinema? I believe that, at the very least, Asian cinemas can provide rich opportunities for answering this question. Asian cinemas express linguistic systems that are historically and culturally determined (and needless to say, quite different from linguistic systems in the West), and because there is a gap in this area of research, it remains to be seen how various Asian languages, as expressed through film, can ac-



commodate the pictorial or image-based medium of the cinema. The question is, therefore, how Asian films reconcile the issue of non-overlapping words and pictures. Can the device of voice-over, which is felt to be largely absent in Asian films in the first place, be a tool of integrating words with pictures?



Asians have not lacked a voice culturally, but this voice may not always be heard in the West. An early example is the Japanese *benshi* of the silent era who were employed to narrate and explain the plots of the movies. The *benshi* became cultural performers and were considered stars in their own right. Although, in a sense, the *benshi* presaged the arrival of sound in cinema, because of their power and cultural influence, they actually hindered the start of the sound era in Japan (Kozloff 24). Similarly, Kozloff mentions the presence of “lecturers” in the Western cinema of the late 1890s that provided “running commentaries for the audience” (23). The “lecturers” and the *benshi* functioned as early narrators seeking to integrate their words into the images on the screen. The impression of Asian (or in this case, Japanese) reticence in cinematic narration, therefore, may be an outcome of a cultural understanding of the integration of words and images in a way that there is no need to highlight the voice as a separate entity.

In the Chinese cultural and literal tradition, words and paintings are said to belong to the same source, which is to say that words and images are indelibly linked together. This was one of the maxims in *Youmeng ying* (*Quiet Dream Shadows*), a book of apothegms by the Qing Dynasty scholar Zhang Chao (1650-1707), parts of which have been translated into English by Lin Yutang (Lin 36-74). The traditional Chinese correlation of words and images shows itself in the pictorial-based language too, where individual Chinese words take on the look of iconic images. Chinese calligraphy is an art form in itself, akin to painting; indeed, both painting and calligraphy use the same techniques. Chinese painters often include words in their works, and both these words and images exist in the same space without distracting from each other. Given the cultural tendency that words and images flow out of the same source, Chinese films may, in fact, have an inherent signifying linguistic system of their own. However, to consider this trait, we need to set it off against the discourse in Western theory, which, as Branigan has informed us, allows “room to argue for a fundamental difference between words and pictures” (15). Such a difference may be culturally determined, as Western scholars themselves argue. Sarah Kozloff reminds us that “the dominant tradition of Western culture has tended towards iconophobia,” and that “the stridency of the pro-image film scholars may be a defense against this dominant tradition, a quasi-conscious revolt against the traditional favoring of the abstract, intellectual word” (11). With such a cultural background of iconophobia, it can be argued that in the context of film theory as formulated in Western scholarship, the voice-over is an intrusion into the narrative flow that posits a separation of words from images. This is contrary to the expectation in Chinese cinema that words and images can flow in tandem.

One method proposed for explaining this agreement in Chinese cinema (and one that we can benefit from for studying the role of voice-over in this issue) is the mode of poetic expression in traditional Chinese poetry. By employing the techniques of *fu* (exposition), *bi* (contrast or metaphor), and *xing* (evocation, but sometimes also translated to mean metonymy), Chinese poets engender an effortless melding of words and images. These literary techniques have been applied to Chinese film criticism. The Hong Kong critic (and sometime filmmaker) Lau Sing-Hon (Liu Chenghan) has been a long-time proponent of applying Chinese poetic modes of *fu*, *bi*, *xing* to Chinese film, and indeed, to film in general (Lau 3-43), but there has not been much English-language scholarship on how such poetic modes function as a formal construct of Chinese film theory. The example that I will use, Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small City*, is often described by Chinese critics as “poetic,”



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but such critics have thus far failed to aptly demonstrate what exactly they mean by this term, and what are its constituents.

I believe that the key might be in the film’s masterful utilization of the poetic *xing* expression. In its poetic utterance, *Spring* effectively distills both *fu* and *bi* techniques to evoke *xing* imagery. Essentially, poets, literary or cinematic, will strive to achieve *xing* which constitutes the peak of poetic expression; therefore, both *fu* and *bi* are considered less vital poetic techniques. The poetic force of *Spring* is arguably a consequence of its summation of *xing* as a subtle, yet palpable conceit. *Xing* embodies the sophistication of the narrative. Many commentators, such as Wei-Qun Dai and Hongchu Fu, have singled out *xing* as the most controversial and least comprehensible element in Chinese poetry. In the same way, inasmuch as we regard *Spring in a Small City* as the cinematic equivalent of poetic *xing*, considering it as an *affect* might be more useful than trying to describe it. Each scene is an epiphany of *xing* affect. Apparently, the director Fei Mu had instructed his screenwriter Li Tianji to revise the script according to the tone and feeling of a poem

by Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo, *Die Lian Hua* (*The Butterfly’s Romance of the Flower*) (Zhu 62). This poem is essentially composed of *bi* and *xing* parts, with a downbeat articulation of *xing*. Fei Mu had probably intended for his film to capture the kind of *xing* expression and mood that the poem enunciated. That the conceit works in *Spring in a Small City* is due to its use of a subjective voice-over narration, which enhances the sensation of poetic utterance. The voice-over, as a vehicle of poetic distillation of the *fu*, *bi*, *xing* techniques, should hence be considered a functional outgrowth of the poetic nature of the film. Naturally, Fei Mu’s method of poetic utterance relies on his use of specific cinematic techniques other than the voice-over narration, including; for example, his signature long takes and dissolves. A closer look at the way these techniques have been used to convey the poetic character of the film (as a classic example of the linguistic and logical relationship of words and images in Chinese cinema) is necessary here.

Spring begins with exterior images of a woman walking alone through the ruins of a mansion; her home, destroyed by the war between Japan and China. We hear her voice-over narration, gradually introducing all the characters in the film: her servant, her sick husband, her sister-in-law, and a doctor friend of her husband (and her own ex-lover) who turns up at the mansion unexpectedly. The woman’s voice-over makes her the focalizer of the narrative, the subject of her focalization being her relationship with

her ex-lover. The moral complications this brings out in her troubled marriage with her husband, and its impact on her sister-in-law are also other parts of this focus. The woman/narrator, then, is placed at the centre of a focalization, which according to Mieke Bal, “is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (146). *Spring* is probably the single most revealing poetic touch in Chinese cinema up to that time, but its innovation is not limited to its poetic tone. A significant aspect of this film is that the woman’s voice-over shifts her perspective from that of a first-person narrator to that of a third-person narrator. It is in this latter role that she describes the doctor’s arrival and can see his every movement, down to the detail of his stepping on the dregs of the husband’s herbal medicine which the servant has thrown out into the backyard (Zhu 63). The woman is the agent that sees in more ways than one: her vision is conjured up by her being both a subjective and objective narrator.

In traditional Chinese poetry, using first-person narration is common, but Chinese poets make use of *bi* and *xing* techniques to associate words of a personal import

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with words of pictorial or imagistic quality without calling attention to a virtual separation of the two. This way, words are used to paint images where meanings are then conjured up metaphorically and metonymically. Juxtapositions are rife, although there may be occasions to question how words actually conjure up the right *xing* images, i.e. what is signified is actually predicated in the signifier. Commentators have explained that the nature of Chinese words makes them particularly prone to juxtapositions. Gu, for example, has declared that “poetic Chinese, because of innate qualities such as monosyllabic characters and lack of connectives, verbal conjugation, gender, case, number, etc., is often open to flexible juxtapositions with unlimited possibilities for reading and interpretation” (7). Here, the concern (more from the Western point of view) is that the narrator (often the first-person narrator) lacks the grammatical structure to make the necessary connections. But Chinese poets nevertheless make the connections through the method of *xing*, which, for our purposes here, may be defined as a metonymic flow of words into imagery. If we consider cinema as a poetic form, we might then say that words and images are juxtapositions in a metonymic flow. The question, then, will be whether the cinematic narrator can actually play the role of integrating the words and images together into a smooth and vibrant flow. Again, the example of Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small City* can be helpful here. What will be the function of the voice-over if we are to view the film as an extended series of *xing* imagery?



The woman’s voice-over in *Spring* links the narrative with images, sometimes in a redundant fashion (i.e. the words merely repeat what is shown on screen), and sometimes as a counterpoint to the images. The voice-over acts as a crucial determinant of the poetic flow in *Spring*. In the middle section of the film, there are several passages where the narrator is utterly absent, but the images retain a certain sense of being shaped by the now-absent narrator’s authority. The poetic current of the narrative is an effect of the narrator’s previous voice-overs which shift from first-person to third-person, making her presence all the more omniscient and therefore omnipotent. The power of the narrator lingers over those scenes where her voice is no longer heard. Fei Mu achieves this effect by his skillful use of dissolves in many of the scenes where the narrator is absent.

Ultimately, the voice-over in *Spring in a Small City* is an attempt by a Chinese filmmaker to integrate not only words with images, but also an old Chinese poetic method (the connotation of *xing* imagery) with the more recent and originally Western art form of the cinema. In this attempt, the voice-over acts as a generic tool, carrying nuances of Chinese form and methodology of expression (the poetic modes of *fu-bi-xing*); while the visual technique of dissolve acts as another generic tool, helping the natural flow of

images be coordinated by words. *Spring*’s achievement is perhaps unique in that the film is still considered to be a rare case of a highly literate representation of poetic form in Chinese cinema. Despite their seemingly conscious “poetic” force, other Chinese breakthroughs, such as the films of the Fifth Generation or the Taiwanese “New Cinema” in the 1980s, are not as literate as this classic voice-over film. Endowed with a “Chinese voice” by the poet-director Fei Mu, *Spring* will remain as a classic example of a generic fusion between the cinemas of the West and the East.

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