

An Analysis of Film Voice-Over and Sound Interpretation Techniques from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

While using the element, "cross-culture", as the movie theme, the part that is easy to bring about debate and discussion mainly consists in the movie's presentation techniques that may or may not fully present its respect and understanding to the interpreted cultures. This essay took two movies, *Good Men*, *Good Women* and *Café Lumière*, directed by Taiwan movie producer, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, as examples to investigate, through the aspect of cross-culture, how "Film Voice-Over" and "Sound" can interpret cultural conflicts and cultural integration and whether the application techniques of "Film Voice-Over" and "Sound" interpret specific cross-cultural implications.

By using interview method, this essay analyzed and investigated the interactive relationship between "Film Voice-Over" and "Sound" during the narration of the movie among different cultures. From results obtained from the interview and as well as from the structure of film text, this essay also analyzed the implication and correlations among different administrative levels. Besides, from the cross-cultural issue reflected in film text, this essay, through movie's perspective, observed and probed into the implicated meanings.

Keywords: Cross-culture, Film Voice-Over, Sound, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Cultural conflict, Cultural integration

Introduction

Movie producer, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, is one of the most important representative figures for Taiwan's new movies in 1980s. Ever since 1983 till today, his movies have received many international awards in various film festivals including the Cannes Film Festival and the Venice Film Festival. His filming aesthetic style not only is unique but often reflects and reviews Taiwan's past history in his productions to provide audiences with opportunities to understand Taiwan's history. Screenwriter, Chu Tien-Wen, who has been worked with him for a long time, once mentioned that Hou uses an alternative way to observe the world in different angles. His movies are comprehensions and as well as expressions of interpretations. (Chu Tien-Wen 1985)

A City of Sadness (1989), *Puppet Master* (1993), and *Good Men, Good Women* (1995) are called "Taiwan Trilogy". In *A City of Sadness*, Hou illustrates Taiwan's transition period from Japanese Administration to Kuomintang Administration. The movie brings many frictions and identifications on national identity and attributes. In *Puppet Master*, by national treasure class hand puppet master Li Tien-Lu's autobiographical movie, Hou states stories of Taiwan during Japanese Administration Period. *Good Men, Good Women* is a movie that describes stories in staggered time frame among the past and the modern time. The movie is composed of three stories and presented in the way of "drama in drama". It describes theatre actress Chiang Bi-Yu's physiological feelings and persecutions in reality as a political victim in about 1940 to 1950. Patriotic youth, Chung Hao-Dong and Chiang Bi-Yu were politically purged due to their presence in the left-wing political activity. Chung Hao-Dong in the end was shooting-executed by the government. Besides, the past story between Liang Ching and her ex-boyfriend were also brought up. By staggered time reflection, the movie shows the unique Hou-style movie language.

Good Men, Good Women is the last movie in "Taiwan Trilogy" by Hou Hsiao-Hsien. This movie states the different political atmosphere and society status in Taiwan history at the time when Kuomintang Government took over the administration power from Japanese, and it also reviews the important white terror issue in Taiwan history through the case of "Keelung High School Guangming News", where Chung Hao-Dong, Chiang Bi-Yu and others were involved. Hou uses the main actress's voice narration to run through and connect three different time and space backgrounds. And the staggered use of different languages like Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Hakka language reflects the use and identity of complicated cross-cultural languages. (Wu Chia-Chi 1997)

Themed at family relationship, in *Café Lumière* the main actress Yoko (played by Hitoto Yo) has a Taiwanese boyfriend. She plans to have a child without marriage relationship and raise the child by herself. The whole movie depicts the connection and interaction between friends and parents, the destined and inseparable emotions about Taiwan, her persistence in searching for deceased Taiwanese musician Chiang Wen-Yeh's past footprints, and her silent supports to her special friend, who loves recording the sound of tram cars everywhere. Voice expression in this movie is considered having important position. With Hou's commonly-used "long take" approach, all the details including all kinds of sounds in the tramway station and inside the tram cars are smoothly, calmly, and slowly presented in the frame. *Café Lumière* is a production to commemorate Japanese movie producer Ozu's(小津安二郎) 100 years old birthday in the nether world. Very often, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies are used for comparison with Ozu's works.

In the film seminar in Hong Kong Baptist University in 2007, Hou Hsiao-Hsien once mentioned that Ozu's specialized in placing the simplest issues and elements in our daily lives into his movies that transmit all the messages in a gradual and implicative way. (Cho Po-Tang 2009)

Interviewees

There are two interviewees in this essay. One is Taiwan's famous director, Mr. Yu Kan-Ping, who invests himself into Taiwan's new movie production in the corresponding period of time with Hou Hsiao-Hsien. He has been engaged in film and television work for nearly four decades and has served as a judge and chief of the jury in Taiwan's Golden Horse Award and a full-time professor in universities. Currently he is the dean of the Department of Popular Performing Arts, Chungyu Institute of Technology, Taiwan.

Mr. Chen Wen-Pin is a screenwriter and also a movie producer. He has put efforts into studying Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies for a long time. The directed "Everlasting Moments" was nominated for competition in Singapore International Film Festival and Heidelberg International Film Festival in 2011. The directed "No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti" was elected the Best Actor in Taipei Film Festival and the Best Original Screenplay in the Golden Horse Award in 2009. Currently he is a deputy professor in the Department of Motion Pictures and Video Communication, Chung Chou University of Science and Technology, Taiwan.

Both interviewees, using Hou Hsiao-Hsien's two films, *Good Men, Good Women* and *Café Lumière* as example; focusing on cultural conflict, cultural integration and whether the films expressing the specific cross-cultural implications section; provide their views and resolve different levels of special film language.

Cultural Integration

As for cultural integration, Director Chen is of the opinion that *Café Lumière* expresses issues relating to the main actress, her parents and her family. It is similar to Ozu's style that often brought up the concepts of family and traditions. In this film, because of giving birth to a child without marriage, the main actress had different views with her parents. The filming technique is similar to the illustration of daughter and father's relationship in Ozu's movies *Early Spring* and *An Autumn Afternoon*, only that *Café Lumière* has even richer family dramatic tension. The author think, this film is very popular in Taiwan. People in Taiwan have high degree of cultural integration toward Japanese culture. For example, the tram car and domesticity that show up in the film are not new for Taiwan people. Suite that was composed by Taiwanese composer Chiang Wen-Yeh in the film drew the main actress's feelings and echoed to the real life, i.e. the environment Chiang Wen-Yeh was at and the cross-national cultures that go across Taiwan, Japan, and China, for historical comparisons.

Different cultural integration: vulnerable due to pregnancy as a metaphor of being in the busy city, Yoko's dream implicating the meaning of movie, and the paintings of leading actor, Hajime, baby surrounded by layer of trains, presenting individual and urban space, complex relationship of intimacy and alienation; while tram with the familiar sound of the rhythm, becoming a symbol of the global city, also plays an important role in the film. (Wenchi Lin 2007)

The author think for a long time Hou Hsiao-Hsien often bring up questions in film to probe into cross-cultural issues and subjects relating to Taiwan's plight. From the selection of actors, *Café Lumière* makes an even clearer expression on cross-cultural awareness. The choice of the main actress (Hitoto Yo) clearly presents the story's background across Taiwan and Japan. The film was taken in Japan and was recorded in Japanese. Many scenes were taken inside tram cars. The process of sounds includes Hitoto Yo's vocal, tram car's sound elements like the sounds of tram car and the broadcasting, and main actor's (played by Asano Tadanobu) vocal to state his own feels and the warm atmosphere between himself and the main actress. The sounds of tram cars

are particularly obvious in the film. While in the final scene, where leading actor Hajime, with his handheld equipment recording the sound of passing train on the platform, in fact, this scene was shot by the film crews who camouflaged as the passengers on the platform. This also shows a Hou's style filming technique: filming without rehearsals, can not be predicted. (Zhang Liang Bei 2009)

As for cultural integration, Director Yu mentioned that Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien has very strong humanitarian color. In *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou views and handles the relationship between people, extensively to the whole family and then ultimately to different nations and races with humane and tolerant mindset. People's helplessness and compromise to their destiny is confronted by challenges and tests of the times. Sometimes, there exist certain degree of criticisms about the authority of the time; however, Hou Hsiao-Hsien often chooses not to name the names directly. And the film voice-over is presented by the technique of natural language, which is considered a kind of cross-culture's cultural integration to truly present the realistic facets of different cultures and lives. Through realistic intention of showing a narrative style, the basic concern is the "human". Humane care becomes very important feature in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film, through day-to-day life, the film slowly talking about the true face of the Taiwan society and history. (Wenchi Lin 2000)

Cultural Conflicts

Some non-realistic style and sense of abstract are from Hou's rather special recording technology. Director Hou's mixing different layer of sound is one of methods for him to stay away realism. He transforms one sound source to another sound source. In *Good Men, Good Women*, *Café Lumière* and other Hou's films, the movie characters often appear in: listening carefully to the voice from other end of cell phone or deliberately maintaining a sense of mystery through the fax machine sound. (Adrian MARTIN 2008)

In the area of cultural conflicts, Director Chen is of the opinion that while speaking of the cultural conflicts in *Good Men, Good Women* in the sounds part, the director's cross-cultural presentation technique is to focus on the main actress, Chiang Bi-Yu, and relate to left-wing intellectual youth's activities in the Japanese Colonial Period. And there are three cultural conflicts and three cultural elements: 1) Japanese Culture - Intellectuals that received Japanese education in the Japanese Colonial Period (in Japanese). 2) Chinese Culture – In order to look for his motherland, the main actor came to China and participated in anti-Japanese activities. But he was considered a traitor in China (i.e. his motherland) (in Chinese). 3) Local Culture - the main actor and the supporting role was Hakka. They spoke Hakka in the rural area, where in between Guangdong and Fujian. By main actor and actress's destiny, the movie sets out the cultural conflicts among Taiwan, China, and Japan, and as well as Taiwan's plight in Japanese Colonial Period.

The implication to present specific cross-cultures

A long time partner of Ho in film making and an extremely important sound designer in Taiwan, Tu Du-Chih has excellent performance in handling sound; from as early as *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983) till now. Tu creates an unique and expressive sound aesthetics. Started from the *A City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien used live recording during the filming to express the realism of different sound in different space. Such technique has appeared in the narrations of several Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies. It transforms the element of text with cross-media and express that with sound. (Ling Zhang 2010)

Director Chen is of the opinion there are songs in different languages, including Hakka, Taiwanese, and Mandarin, in *Good Men, Good Women*. Among which, some songs, like “*Why don't we sing*”, were forbidden songs at that time. In the music part, Hou Hsiao-Hsien likes to use songs that are sung by Taiwan local singers like Tsai Chen-Nan and Tsai Chiu-Feng. And most of these songs are very popular among people of the underlying social class and synthesize the dreams of both the people from underlying social class and the intellectuals (the dream of intellectuals refers to songs that were prohibited at the time when Kuomintang held the authority). Some Taiwanese songs were even not heard or considered not existed before Hou's movie came out.

The author thinks that Hou Hsiao-Hsien choose film songs, we can see his affections and attitudes toward Taiwan are inclined to the life of left-wing underlying social class. The presentation of main actor's OS and VO shows Hou Hsiao-Hsien's unique movie language. In the area of sounds processing, the title of *Good Men, Good Women* comes the sound of fax machine, and the television in the living room is playing Director Ozu's movie. Director Chen think, the appearance of main actress's vocal is just like a key to open up the whole film and lead audiences to go into Chiang Bi-Yu's world in the past. Through the design of sounds, the film guides audiences go into different scenes or time frames. The technique just shows a typical Hou Hsiao-Hsien film. Hou often puts important figures and issues in Taiwan's history into his story, such as Wen-Yeh Chiang in the *Café Lumière*, Chiang Bi-Yu and Chung Hao-Tung in *Good Men, Good Women* (although these people are not mainstream figures, but they did have important position in Taiwan's history).

Director Yu mentioned that as for sounds utilization, because of social environment, natural language is customary used to increase the film's factuality. This depends on a style, which uses first-person to subjectively illustrate the issue to present specific cross-cultural implications. Chu Tien-Wen is a screenwriter that Hou has been worked with for a long time. He provides many helps on the writing languages, i.e. uses the first person to narrate the story. Sounds were produced in the recording studio. And the narration is done in the way of voice-over, so the audiences can connect fragments into one complete story by the sense of hearing.

Conclusion

From a higher level of cultural perspective, Hou Hsiao-Hsien utilize Taiwan's history and her status as the main theme of thinking on the structure of the movies to present cross-cultural related issues. To deal with the changing of time (for example from 1940s to 1960s) in his movies, Hou uses elements of sound to render the time, spatial variability and issues related to cross-cultural. It is Hou Hsiao-Hsien's unique filming style to extensively use voice-over and monologue. Using different local language or dialogue in the movie to truly present a reality and diversity of the story. The use of local language in the movie, Hou Hsiao-Hsien wish to imply the complicated racial and social issues of different identity, conflict and reconciliation in the society. His goal is to present a truly cross-cultural level of meaning.

Tow of his movies *Good Men, Good Women* and *Cafe Lumiere* represent the special film culture in Taiwan from early 80s to early 2000s. It was the time when Taiwanese consciousness on the rise and Taiwanese society was seeking its true identity from her own history. In the mix of Taiwanese consciousness and transnational culture, this different historical cultural experience give birth a unique film language and cultural implications. In his films, Hou Hsiao-Hsien touched the somewhat then forbidden and still sensitive topics of "white terror" and tragic February 28 incident in Taiwan's modern history. This can be follow-up study relate to the current research by adding social ideological element to explore Hou Hsiao-Hsien's unique way

to tell a historical and social sensitive story. Furthermore, analyzing and comparing the filming style of realism and means of interpretation between Hou Hsiao-Hsien and late Japanese director Ozu(小津安二郎) can provide a direction of additional research in the future.



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