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## Music in Film and Literature through Shen Congwen's Editing of the Script of *The Border Town*

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*When editing the film script of his novella The Border Town, Shen Congwen gave special instructions not just on the storyline, but also on how sounds should be used in the film. This paper analyses the effect of the differentiated use of music and sound by the author and director.*

How can we hear music through written words? How can sound convey a feeling? How can a film use silence to express the tranquillity between words? Film is an art form which encompasses several others, from literature and the visual arts to music. These disparate disciplines come together in a film to produce a collective effect upon the audience. The combination of art forms which is essential to all films becomes even greater when the film is a literary adaptation, as the original piece of writing must be taken into consideration.

Literary adaptations have been popular since the early days of cinema. While Jane Austen could not have known what film was and thus could not offer her opinions on a film adapted from one of her novels, a modern writer may – for the sake of “authenticity” – be consulted when one of their novels is to be adapted. Shen Congwen is one of the most famous Chinese writers of the twentieth century, and when the Chinese director Ling Zifeng planned to adapt his well-known novella *The Border Town* into a film in the early 1980s, Shen was asked to edit the film script. There were two other versions of films based on *The Border Town*. One was shot in Hong Kong in the 1950s titled *Cuicui*, but received poor critical reception. The other, according to J.C. Kinkley, author of Shen Congwen's first biography, was going to be filmed in a Shanghai Film Studio but was aborted because Shen was not content with the script. When Kinkley interviewed Shen, he was told Shen refused to accept the copyright payment of the latter, and the film was finally filmed when the Ling Zifeng became the director and Shen personally edited the script (Kinkley 343). The final version directed by Ling is a faithful reproduction of Shen's story with some slight changes. It largely uses the original dialogues and it features a voiceover which uses the original text to explain things that are not shown. This article will examine the original novella and Shen's input to the script and compare them with both the original script and the final presentation of the film, in order to evaluate Shen's influence on music and sound effects in the film. It will explore how the implicit and explicit emotional resonances of described sound in the book are translated into the more literal medium of actual sound in the film. *The Border Town* was shot in Shen's home region in the early 1980s, directed by Ling Zifeng and presented by Beijing Film Studio. It was awarded the Chinese Golden Rooster Award for best director in 1985 ([people.com.cn](http://people.com.cn)) and a Special Jury Citation at the 9<sup>th</sup> Montreal World Film Festival ([ffm-montreal.org](http://ffm-montreal.org)) in the same year.

The story of *The Border Town* is about a teenaged girl named Cuicui (or “Emerald” in Gladys Yang’s translation), whose parents died for love, and therefore lives with her grandfather who cherishes her very much. It is set in Shen’s beloved home region West Hunan in the early twentieth century, in a small border town on the River You called Chadong. Two brothers both fall in love with Cuicui and, following the local tradition, they decide to sing at night to win her love. The younger brother Nuosong is a better singer and it is he whom Cuicui already loves. However, Cuicui’s grandfather, who is too eager to ensure a happy life for his orphan granddaughter, misunderstands her heart, and this misunderstanding eventually leads to the elder brother leaving and unfortunately dying in a boat accident. Nuosong blames Cuicui’s grandfather for his brother’s death. Despite his love for Cuicui, he chooses to leave the town. Because of his misery, the old grandfather passes away on a stormy night, leaving the young girl behind alone, to wait for the young man singing in her dreams to come back.

Shen Congwen is famous for his writings about his home region West Hunan. The picturesque scenery of the mountainous region and the humanity of its people live eternally in Shen’s memory and in his imagination, and of course, in his words. Thus, when Shen edited the film script sentence by sentence, he made remarks not only on the storyline, but also on the soundtrack of the film, in order to assist in the recreation of a peaceful and tranquil border town atmosphere. “The basic thing in all films is to create something that sounds believable to everyone” (qtd. in Carlsson 239), and music should play a significant role in achieving this goal. The music in the completed film – mostly played on local instruments and bearing the features of the folk music of that region – helps to create an authentic small town atmosphere. The film also features a few short songs sung by the characters, in a quite natural way as described by Shen in the novella. The theme music is played on a bamboo flute, solo, without lyrics. Music and other sounds in this film are presented gently and quietly, and are naturally implanted in the scenes, all in such a way that if you do not pay special attention, you might not notice their presence. This approach to music distinguishes the film from many other Chinese films from those years, especially the films about war and revolution.

Although Shen was never a screenwriter, as a writer who constantly refers to music in his works, his sensitivity to sound enabled him to appreciate the function of music in films. In the edited film script, Shen gave special instructions on how various sounds (including background music, singing and music by the characters, animal sounds such as chirps, as well as silence) were to be used in the film. But literary sound and music is different from the sound and music in films, as the former exists only in the imagination of the reader, while the latter is the direct aural effect that we receive as part of our cinematic experience. When adapting novels with such “imaginary” music to a film, it is sometimes inevitable that the filmmakers need to transform “the abstract” to “the concrete.” However, it is most problematic to do so, as music in words can be very different in the minds of the author and the readers. But is it true that after the filmmakers pin down the musical arrangement of a film, the audience can still experience the same music differently? Or furthermore, is it true that if the author is involved in the filmmaking process, the reader can finally hear the music from the novel as the author imagined it?

In *Film: A Critical Introduction*, Maria Pramaggiore defines film sounds as “dialogue, sound effects, and music” (235). Film sounds can also be categorised into diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Diegetic sounds occur as part of the narrative, stemming from action on screen; whereas non-diegetic sounds refer to the external sounds added during the editing process, which are only audible to the audience.<sup>i</sup> According to these definitions, bird and insect chirps should be categorised as “sound effects” which are diegetic. However, according to Shen, the chirps should not be separated from music. In a letter Shen wrote concerning the editing of the film script, he suggested that the film

can only be a success if taken as a landscape scroll painting of Yuan river basin. Background music only needs the overlapping bird chirps of cuckoo, thrushes and rose-finches to serve as a foil, plus the sound of wind blowing through bamboos, the sculling songs from the boats going up and down in the river, as well as the tweets of different mountain birds along the You River. This background music runs through the whole film, and only stops at dialogues.<sup>ii</sup>

应当作为一个沅水流域画卷来处理，才会成功。音乐也只需要用杜鹃声和画眉、朱雀声反复重叠相衬，加上风吹竹篁声，船上下滩时的号子声，及一条酉水流域水边的各种不同山鸟歌呼声为主调，贯串全剧，只在对话时停停 (26:136).

In another letter on this issue, Shen explained what the background music should be like in the film: he introduced three different kinds of work songs sung by the local boat trackers, and he suggested that these songs – combined with the bird chirps and other sounds of nature – would make the most wonderful background music (26:150). In these short instructions, Shen set the fundamental tone of the film, using diegetic sounds that were particular to the local area to create an authentic reproduction of the story but in the meantime not overusing them so as to divert attention away from the main storyline.

While the music in literature and the music in film both have various functions, they share one function in common: that is, they both serve as a stimulus of emotions. Linda Hutcheon argues that “music offers aural ‘equivalents’ for characters’ emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience” (23). Sometimes music in films can arouse similar emotions in the characters as well as in the audience. For example, in the edited script, at the funeral of Cuicui’s grandfather, Shen noted and insisted that this traditional elegy – woven into the scene of white candles melting – was necessary, and he especially instructed that it should be sung “lazily,” and accompanied by a local percussion instrument that he had heard before in the same region. The elegy was not in the initial script. Combined with a scene of a funeral, the elegy is associated – for both the character and the audience – with death, and the slow “lazy” tempo of the elegy itself can arouse sadness, especially when this “lazily” sung elegy is later contrasted with Cuicui’s wail, which can lead the audience into a real experience of the funeral and to both sympathise and empathise with the character.

Nevertheless, it is not always the case that the “aural equivalents” for the characters’ emotions in film and those in literature can function in the same way. As Hutcheon continues to argue, “telling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and aurally in any of

the many performance media available” (23), because a novel can “take us into the minds and feelings of characters at will” (24), whereas a film “shows.” For example, in the original script, when Cuicui stops playing her flute in the bamboo forest, the cuckoo responds with “dismal” (“悲凉”) songs. However, in the edited version, Shen specifically deleted the word “dismal” and changed it to “intermittent” (“间歇”) (8:174). In a written version, the reader can be told to feel “dismal,” and thus they are automatically linked to the emotion the author wishes to convey. In the original novel, Shen describes the scene thus:

As evening draws in the birds return to their nests. Only the [cuckoo] sings on and on. ... As Emerald watches the red clouds in the sky and listens to the murmur of voices from the ferry, a faint sense of desolation creeps over her (trans. Yang 67)

天快夜了，别的雀子似乎都在休息了，只杜鹃叫个不息……翠翠看着天上的红云，听着渡口飘乡生意人的杂乱声音，心中有些儿薄薄的凄凉 (Shen 8:118).

The word “desolation” can lead the readers to sense the relative emotion similar to the character’s, but the effect is different in the film as such bird songs or human murmurings may be able to stir feelings and thoughts in the audience which are different from the feelings and thoughts of the characters. In this way, diegetic sounds can simultaneously be non-diegetic.

In traditional Chinese literature, symbolic images of animals are often used to express certain emotions. An unceasingly singing cuckoo is usually metaphorically depicted as crying and bleeding heartbrokenly in order to create a tragic image (Sun 67). There is another place where the cuckoo is brought up in the edited script. The original script says, “in the bamboo forest opposite, the sound of cuckoo crying to bleed can draw one’s tears” (“对溪竹篁里，杜鹃泣血声声催人泪下” 8:172), but Shen left his remark, “country people are used to these kinds of bird chirps, they would only feel it’s sharp and intense but would not break into tears” (“乡下人听这个鸟声听惯了，只感到尖锐急迫，不会什么‘催人泪下’” 8:172). “Country people” describes the characters in the film and story, as well as Shen, as he always considers himself one of them, but here the intention of the screenwriters was to stimulate the emotions of the *audience* rather than the emotions of the characters. The translator of one version of *The Border Town*, Gladys Yang, understanding the specific cultural resonances of cuckoo song, adapted it for Western culture, by translating the Chinese word “cuckoo” into “nightingale,” as the image of the nightingale for the Western reader may be more appropriate for evoking similar emotions.

The screenwriters used the cuckoo song in the soundtrack with much the same intention as Yang’s translation: in order to evoke associations aimed at arousing sad feelings in the spectators. This sound metaphor can only be taken as a natural sound for the “country people” characters and those in the audience who are not familiar with the metaphor. However, it would be able reach the emotions of an educated Chinese city audience, familiar with its uses in Chinese literature, such as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of the most famous Chinese novels. In his article “The Image of Lin Daiyu as Symbolic of the Poetic Sentiments of Ancient Chinese Literary Mind” (“作为中国古代文士心灵史象征的黛玉形象”), Sun Mingqiang demonstrates that the novel’s heroine

Lin Daiyu can be seen as an image of a cuckoo. She was a poet at heart and always true to love, but she was sensitive and melancholy, and finally died of a broken heart, coughing blood just like the cuckoos described in Chinese poetry.

If we were to categorise film sounds into diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, here the sharp and intense cuckoo singing should stand somewhere in between, as it can be seen as diegetic for the characters since it indicates the time and place, but for some audience members it is a non-diegetic sound added to arouse sad emotions. In order to enhance the emotional effect of cuckoo singing, the film adds voiceover at some points to tell the audience the thoughts of the characters. In one scene, where both Cuicui and her grandfather are lost in their own thoughts, the voiceover and non-diegetic music are added after the cuckoo singing. The voiceover is telling the audience that Grandfather has realised that Cuicui has matured. He is then worrying about his old age and thinking that he should ensure the girl's marriage, so that she will be happy for the rest of her life. To some degree, the voiceover gives the cuckoo singing deeper meaning by attaching it to the emotions of the characters.

As a matter of fact, pure non-diegetic sound rarely occurs in the edited script by Shen and the final presentation of the film. Shen turned down the request to write a theme song for the film, and suggested in the editing that

It seems that it is more effective to use various natural sounds. The sounds need to be reduced, too much at this stage. It might be better to use shawm<sup>iii</sup> in the background music, off and on, such an effect may be better. Or you can use the flute in the way the flute is used like whistling, alternative to other instruments like suona horn<sup>iv</sup>, to produce a simple and tranquil effect. This effect must be achieved, to serve as foil to the quietness of this small town.

似以充分利用自然界的各种声音易出效果。还需要尽可能时间少些，照目下习惯，都多了些。如配音可能用小芦管好听，生生不成节奏，效果反而好些。否则用笛声，也得形成一种短笛无声代口吹的情形，用唢呐等交替使用，形成素朴静寂效果，且必须形成这个气氛，反应小城应有的静。

(8:156)

From the final presentation of the film, it seems that the filmmakers accepted Shen Congwen's advice. There are very few full pieces of non-diegetic background music except for occasional intermittent flute music and bird songs.

One piece of music inconspicuously changes from diegetic to non-diegetic. It is a piece of flute music, played by Cuicui's grandfather, after which the shot turns to the landscape and Cuicui lying pensively on a hillside. The flute's tranquil but sorrowful sound sets the mood for this part of the film, but together with Cuicui's expression on screen it simultaneously represents her sorrow. Even though in other West Hunan stories written by Shen, the characters sing rather often because of the local tradition, and though in the original story, Cuicui, her grandfather, the young man Nuosong and other characters did sing a few songs, *The Border Town* has not been turned into a musical. In the film, only a song by a prostitute, a song by Nuosong, a song by Grandfather, a ballad by Cuicui and finally the elegy for Grandfather are used. All of these songs are local folk songs that the characters would sing in

daily life, and they are used because they are essential to the plot. Shen noted in his edited version of the script, “The songs are in the appendix, hope you only use a few as needed, it’s unnecessary to use too many” (“唱歌另抄一份附上，望就需要选几段，不必过多” 154). The lyrics of the song Nuosong sings in the film at night for Cuicui to express his affection are not included in the novella. This song, a folk song of West Hunan, is almost certainly one of the songs from this appendix.<sup>v</sup>

Except for the pieces of music necessary to the plot, the usage of all other sounds and music in this film seems to share one purpose: to create the sense of silence/tranquillity that Shen Congwen wished to achieve. It is successful in this respect. Shen’s instruction corresponds with Michel Chion’s explanation of silence in film:

So silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we’ve heard before-hand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast. Another way to express silence, which might or might not be associated with the procedures I have just described, consists in subjecting the listener to ... noises (57).

Whether you consider the bird songs and other local sounds, like the sound of a waterwheel, as music or as noise, the existence of these sounds in this film actually creates silence, and an emptiness that can be felt by the audience. It allows the audience to empathise with the emptiness in Cuicui’s heart after her grandfather’s death and her unrequited hope for her love to return. The soundtrack of the film *The Border Town* is thus highly successful, as it helps to reproduce the tranquil and peaceful atmosphere of the border town Shen describes in words, while at the same time it also generates a sad tone for both the characters and the audience. Sadness is generated, for instance, by the music that may be called “theme music” – the piece of bamboo flute music that is played at the beginning and the end, and occasionally during the film. The high pitch of the instrument is reflected in the hollowness and quietness of the mountainous region, and it contrasts with the sound of water flowing. It is a piece of slow and gentle music, but also a sad one. It is played when Cuicui’s grandfather remembers the death of the girl’s parents, an event he never discusses with her as he is afraid that history might repeat itself. This piece of music reminds the audience of the sadness of the three generations and thus sets the tone of the film. In this way, the theme music also helps to create a sense of continuity within the film.

Not long after the novella *The Border Town* was published in 1934, Liu Xiwei reviewed the story as “a poem, a love song Nuosong sang for Cuicui” (“一首诗，是二老唱给翠翠的情歌” Liu 201), and later Shen considered Liu as the only critic who truly understood *The Border Town*.<sup>vi</sup> In the original script, the screen writers wanted to use Nuosong’s songs at the end of the film, but Shen vetoed it. Instead, he suggested that they use sculling songs as the ending (Shen 8:192). Shen probably did not want a real love song to reflect a metaphorical love song, as no actual music could surpass the music in the imagination in this case. However, Shen did consider that some music was necessary to the film. Actual music is better at creating an atmosphere, enhancing the imagination, and maximising the audience’s empathy for the characters. Through music and sounds, the film reproduces “the love song Nuosong sang for Cuicui” in the minds of the audience.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*.

<sup>ii</sup> My translation; unless specifically noted, all the quotations from Chinese are translated by me.

<sup>iii</sup> ‘Lu-guan’, a kind of instrument that can be found in southwest China, which is a little similar to a flute or whistle.

<sup>iv</sup> A very commonly seen Chinese wind instrument.

<sup>v</sup> The song Nuosong sings is used as an example of a local folksong in the introductory article ‘The Arts of Miao People in West Hunan’ (‘湘西苗族的艺术’). This song also appears in Shen’s novellas “The Story of A’hei: the rain” (‘阿黑小史：雨’) and “Xiaoxiao” (‘萧萧’), sung by the characters.

<sup>vi</sup> The original quote from Shen on Liu’s review is “Unfortunately, it was not until 1935 that there was this Mr. Liu Xiwei who could taste the poetic lyricism and the anguish of a young man with an injured heart woven in the words and literary form, so as to see the picturesque and musical effect in the short pieces such as *The Border Town* and “*Sansan*”. Only this critic could figure out a little truth from the surface of the words and the depth of the work” (“不幸得很是直到二十四年，才有刘西渭先生，能从《边城》和其他《三三》等短篇中，看出诗的抒情和年青生活心受伤后的痛楚，交织在文字与形式里，如何见出画面并音乐效果。唯有这个批评家从作品深处与文字表面，发掘出那么一点真实” Shen 27:25).

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