

# Analysis of the Role of Sound in the Construction of Oriental Aesthetics in the Film "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains"

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**Abstract.** "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains", known as Gu Xiaogang's debut film, was screened at the closing ceremony of La Semaine de la critique at the 72nd Cannes International Film Festival and received a lot of attention. Charles Tesson, in the pre-screening introduction, compared the film to Edward Yang's "A Brighter Summer Day" and said it was a "Chinese film like you've never seen before". The film told a story of an elderly mother who unexpectedly experienced a stroke and lost her mind on her birthday party, leaving four families to face the test of love and reality. From a quiet daily scene, the film contained so considerable information including the splendid land, dilemma and changes of time, reflecting the authenticity of the life in China in contemporary time. Inspired by the famous painting "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains", the film narrated the story in a chronological order of four seasons and merged the traditional Chinese paintings' concept with the light and shadow. The movie is the modern version of the painting's landscape brought to life, where the changing seasons are interwoven with human lives. The whole film presents real Chinese family relationship with the help of scrolling picture and changing scenes around based on the cavalier perspective theory in Chinese painting. The vicissitudes of life and all the odds and ends are indeed poetry depicting human life in an extraordinary period where a nobody can do nothing but sigh after having been through a lot. The sound, acting as an important component of audio-visual language, contributes a lot to the oriental aesthetics with its unique characteristics.

**Keywords:** Sound Creation; Literati and Landscape.

## 1. Language: The Separation of Speech and Song

There are three or even more narrative systems coexisting in Chinese opera: speech, song and the actors' physical performance (normally dance and combat). The stage factor, such as the face painting (or facial makeup), the apparels, the singing aria, and the tune's name, can be seen as another system. These several systems coexist with each other in a complex way: sometimes in collaboration, sometimes in overlapping and sometimes in opposition to each other (Zhou, 2020). Corresponding to the aforementioned framework of language system, Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains has two systems, the dialect of Fuyang and mandarin, which separate from or even in opposition to each other, forming the film's unique language system.

### 1.1 Proportion and Switch of the Two Languages

The film is mostly in dialect, with Mandarin interwoven into it. The dividing point lies in the characters and the topics to which the language content refers. Firstly, in terms of the characterizations, most of the characters speak dialects, while only Gu Xi and Jiang Yi speak Mandarin. The difference between these characters lies in their life experiences and the value symbols they represent. Gu Xi and Jiang Yi, unlike the other main characters in the film, are young people who have returned from their studies in the big city, and are witnesses to modern urban civilization, so they always resonate with the development of the times. When they are placed with the residents of the small town, the two separate language systems show the gap between the two groups and the two distinct states of mind of the characters in the changing times. Secondly, in terms of the topics to which the language content refers, taking the grandmother's bilingual use as an example, the topics mentioned by the grandmother in dialect can be roughly summarized into two categories: economy-related issues (such as the gift money, support and the distribution of compensation money for the demolished house) and those related to daily life and family chores. When the grandmother talks to her granddaughter Gu Xi

and Gu Xi's lover Jiang Yi about some philosophical issues such as life and love, they speak in Mandarin. At this point, the two language systems both assume the role of transmitting information in the characters' dialogues and also serve for the portrayal of characters and the construction of different scenes in the film to a certain extent.

### 1.2 The Intrinsic Value and Connotation of the Two Language Systems

The two separate and even opposing language systems, meanwhile, metaphorically represent the relationship between speakers and their changes. Mandarin is a strong language system commonly used in the public space of society, while their dialect is a weak language system commonly used in the living space. In this way Mandarin and dialect form a two-dimensional space of strength and weakness, mainstream and periphery. (Sun & Lu, 2016). The two-dimensional space between dialect and Mandarin in this film is the two-dimensional space formed between the main characters speaking the dialect and the main characters speaking Mandarin in the film. Firstly, the two languages imply the gap and divide between the two sides of the dialogue, which is most evident in the dialogue between Gu Xi and Jiang Yi when they go home to visit their parents on the Mid-Autumn Festival. Secondly, the switch of the two languages is a metaphor for the change of the characters' relationship. At the end of the film, while going down the mountain together with Jiang Yi, Gu Xi's father no longer speaks in dialect, but chooses to talk to Jiang Yi in Mandarin with an accent, so that the characters' relationship moves from confrontation to reconciliation. Thirdly, Mandarin and dialect are representatives of the mainstream language and regional language respectively, symbolizing the confusion of people living in a small town with roots in the face of changing times and mainstream culture and changing contexts.

### 1.3 Special Expressions About the Traditional Aesthetics

After sorting out the language system mentioned above, the characters in "*Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*" usually adopt different expressions when they talk about traditional Chinese culture and related imagery in their monologues, which highlights the features of oriental aesthetics. For example, in the film, when Jiang Yi is teaching, he talks about the great painting "*Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*" and thus points out that the essence of Chinese literati painting lies in mountains and water. It is an allusion to the basic idea of the aesthetics of the film's use of scrolling picture, and the expressions here obviously turn from colloquial style to formal one. Another example is that when Gu Xi and Jiang Yi are strolling along the river, they recall the play "Jumping off the Boat" which they rehearsed and cast in college. The dichotomy between reality and ideal, life and distant places is reinforced by this dramatic monologue. It is worth mentioning that this section adopts the structure of a play within a play, with imagery more typical of traditional Chinese culture - the temple, landscape, sailing boat, bamboo leaf and skiff. Life is like a journey rowing against the current where everyone is "waiting for the ferry", and every search is for a better "reunion".

In summary, on the one hand, the coexistence of dialect and Mandarin is an epitome of the social reality brought about by the accelerated urbanization and mobility of people. On the other hand, the two language systems portray the regional characteristics of Fuyang and the original daily life of the small characters, thus integrating the ideas of the traditional Chinese opera language system with the aesthetics of the long scroll in this film.

## 2. Music: Creating Aesthetic Atmosphere with Sound

*Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* is a film that uses painting as a carrier to express the values and aesthetics of the Chinese literati accumulated over thousands of years. In addition to the language of the shots, music should be the best way to present the meaning of oriental aesthetics in the film. At the same time, music also serves for the construction of traditional Chinese contexts, playing the spiritual sound of the aesthetics of the scrolls from several sides. The film's music itself has many distinctive features, including instrumentation, melody, and reverb, which complement the film's

style and make the music a highlight of the film. The film's original soundtrack was composed by Chinese experimental musician Dou Wei, with a total of ten tracks (shown below). It should be noted here that some of these pieces were composed before the film was created, providing inspiration for the aesthetic construction of the film, such as 《东游记》 ("Journey to the East"), 《早春的雨伞》 ("Umbrella in Early Spring"), and 《笛音夏扇》 ("Flute Sound Summer Fan").

**Table 1.** The Film's soundtrack (ten tracks)

Composer	Soundtrack
DOU Wei	《笛音夏扇》 ("Flute Sound Summer Fan").
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《东游记》 ("Journey to the East")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《早春的雨伞》 ("Umbrella in Early Spring")
暮良文王 (Muliangwenwang)	《文王贴》 ("Note of Wenwang")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《春分拾琴图》 ("Music of Chinese Zither in Spring Equinox")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《上步南山》 ("Stepping on the South Mountain")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《正月散曲》 ("Verse in Lunar January")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《天宫图》 ("Picture of Palace in Heaven")
不一样乐队 (Band of Difference)	《山水清音图》 ("Landscape and Gurgling Sound")
暮良文王 (Muliangwenwang)	《渔阳掺挝帖》 ("Note Played by Ancient Chinese Drum in Yuyang")

暮良文王 (Muliangwenwang): "暮良" is an alias of Dou Wei. He grouped a band with Wen Bin and Wang Xiaofang and named this band with his alias and their family names.

\* The table content is from the end tail leader list of "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains".

## 2.1 Retrospect and Current Era: Crafty Combination of Traditional Chinese Musical Instruments and Electronic Ones

The combination of Chinese and Western musical elements is highly compatible with the aesthetic tone of the film, and the crafty combination of traditional Chinese music and electronic music can be considered one of the most significant features of the entire soundtrack. Take 《渔阳掺挝帖》 as an example, it is named after a drum song from A New Account of the Tales of the World, which is adopted to describe the drum tune driving people excited. This song contains three pieces, namely 《跫音似》 ("Sounds like Footstep"), 《渔阳界》 (the Boundary of Yuyang) and 《或掺挝》 (Possible, the Drum Song). Although they are originated from such an ancient time, they certainly sound spiritual. The artistic style of these three pieces is ethereal and free, quietly hiding in them the obsession with nature and the awareness of life. The two main instruments chosen for the dialogue were the *yangqin* and the guitar, which are two very different instruments. *Yangqin* is a traditional Chinese folk instrument with a crisp and grainy sound, a large volume, and a combination of rigidity and flexibility. Capable of a limitless range of expression, *Yangqin* often functions as a "piano accompaniment" in Chinese folk instrumental ensembles and folk bands. Guitars, of which there are many varieties, were originally considered the main instrument in Western pop, rock, blues and flamenco music. They often appear as a soloist or duet in classical music and play a supporting role in chamber music and orchestral music. Compared with the *yangqin*, the guitar has a thicker tone and a wider range, so the interplay of these two instruments is undoubtedly a perfect combination of East and West, classical and modern, ancient and modern.

From the content of music performance, each piece in the soundtrack is like a classical Chinese literati painting. Listening to the sound, one can enter the world it creates. 《跫音似》 ("Sounds like Footstep") here is taken for illustration. On first listening to it, one can't help associating it with Fan Kuan's 《溪山旅行图》 ("Trip to the Xishan Mountain") of the Northern Song Dynasty. The *yangqin* and percussion at the beginning of the piece are like the rain-dotted technique in a painting, which brings out the panoramic view of the lofty mountains. The guitar string music in the mix is like the

accumulation of ink to draw out the somber effect of "a mountain at night, with deep layers of blackness". The modern electronic music elements and the oriental aesthetics ones are in harmony with each other, with a magnificent ancient atmosphere. The speech is sometimes far and sometimes near, as if it is a whisper from the ancient times, which draws out the infinite grief. In addition, the film's soundtrack adopts different styles of music materials such as sheng, xiao, yangqin, clavier and guitar, integrating the western and the eastern features together. As the plot of the film progresses, the different music materials are naturally connected, creating a situation with sound from different dimensions and conveying the thoughts of the past and the present.

## 2.2 Landscape: The Mix of Traditional Chinese Painting and the Portrait of Contemporary People

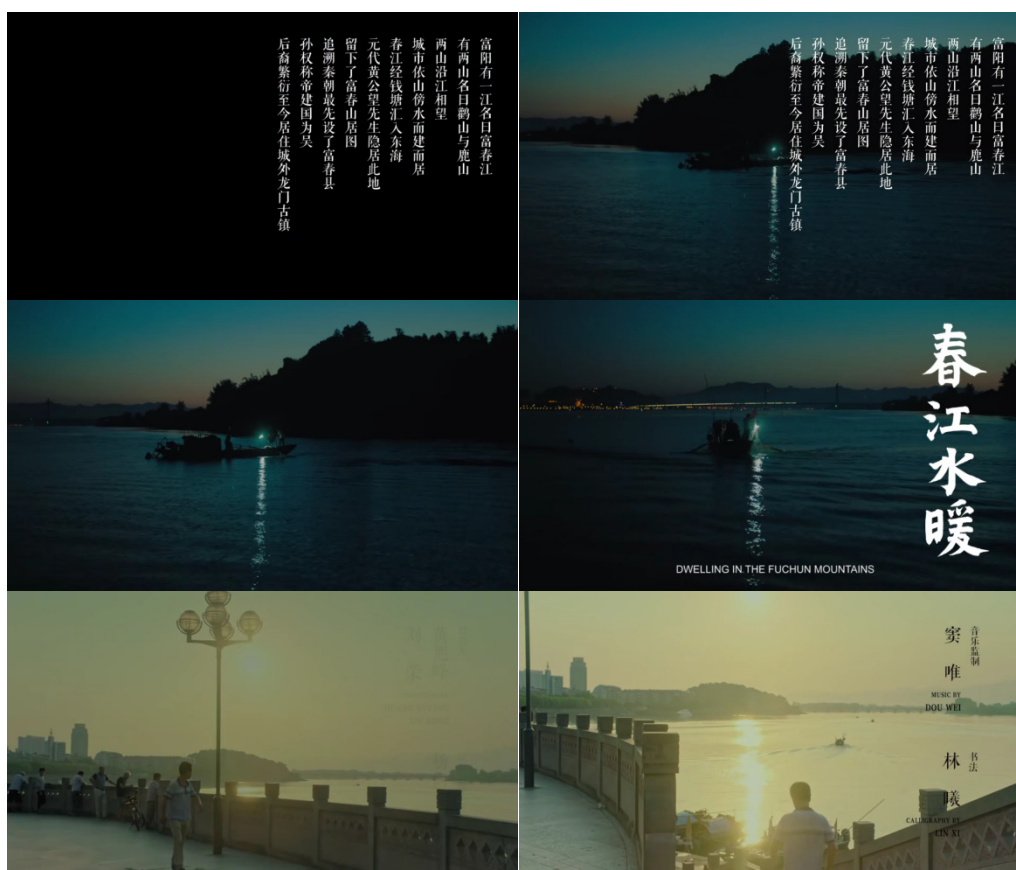


Fig 1. The Aesthetic Composition of Film Chinese Painting and Portrait

The delicate music depicts the subtle scenes and the transition of moods. In the opening section of the film after the banquet, the sound of a flute is heard, interspersed with the chirping of robins. A line about the historical background of the *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* emerges on the right side of the screen. The sound of sculling comes up, and the background gradually fades from the black field into the Fuchun River at dawn. A small boat slowly sails on the river, lit by a cluster of fishing fires. The shots follow the movement of the boat and move across. With the melody of the flute, the boat moves to the center of the screen, heading towards the distance, and the words "春江水暖" written in calligraphy appear on the right side of the screen. The sound of the flute diminishes, and the subtitles and the picture then fade to black. The sound of the flute starts again, and the shot follows the eldest son as he walks along the shore, looking for the second eldest son and his wife's fishing boat. Around the corner, a row of boats is moored under the stairs, not far from where the morning light is shining on the water. The sound of the flute fades away, followed by the living sound of daily chores.

This section takes the sound of a flute as a clue. The scenes change from dawn to early morning, from a fishing boat to people who rise early to work, from the transition between the landscape to the city clouds, and from the classical aesthetic mood to the migration to the portrait of people. Throughout the film, the soundtrack has a rich sense of different dimensions. The film attempts to build a bridge between the traditional Chinese aesthetic mood and the contemporary scene with a delicate soundtrack, achieving a natural connection between the changes in the field. Its musical ideas are quite consistent with the process of their integration.

### 3. Sound Design: Inspiration from the Cavalier Perspective Theory of Chinese Painting

The sound design of the film is ingenious. The sound in this film, in combination with the long shots, scrolls and the idea of "traveling view", is given a huge space for delivering both ideal and realistic thoughts. In terms of the audio-visual effect, the length of the film is equally divided between writing and reality, which is in line with the creative style of the film to the greatest extent.

Take the swim in the first half of the twelve-minute long shot for exemplification. As the characters jump into the water, the sound of splashed water can be heard, and the auditory center first came to audience's sight is Jiang Yi who swimming in the water. As the camera follows the characters horizontally, Jiang Yi is breathing and pushing his arms away from the water waves to move forward, during which the background sound is in correspondence with his movements, in addition to the natural sounds of insects and birds. When Gu Xi appears from the shore, the auditory center is converted to Gu Xi. The background sound is her ever-louder singing and laughing. As Gu Xi disappears into the forest and walks further and further away, the voice also fades away. At the same time, Gu Yi's gasping sound when swimming is aggravated, and the sound of water waves when diving is interspersed. When Jiang Yi gets closer to the Longchuan Pavilion, outside the picture the quacks of the duck comes into the ear, the voice of people talking on the shore becomes clearer and clearer as the distance gets closer, and the auditory center is shifted for the third time. When Jiang Yi swims away, he comes across with a man who is closer to the camera than Jiang Yi's position in the picture. Since they swim differently, the sound and breathing rate produced are slightly different, and the fourth shift of the auditory center is quietly completed. Finally, the auditory center returns to Jiang Yi himself when he is close to the shore.



Fig 2. Design with Concept of cavalier perspective in Chinese painting into the sound

The sound design of this section breaks away from the focal point perspective often used in other films and subtly integrates the concept of cavalier perspective in Chinese painting into the sound,

together with the long rolling picture language to form an aesthetic experience of "traveling for viewing". At the same time, the film intends to show and reconstruct the relationship between the characters and the environment through sound scenes. On the one hand, the characters, who tend to recall the local customs and the past time, are influenced by the environment. On the other hand, the environment, where house removal and environmental pollution have become a common phenomenon, is influenced by the characters.

#### 4. Epilog

The film is the first volume of the director's conception of "A Thousand Miles to the East". The story goes through four seasons, and the images convey the beauty of nature beyond the four seasons, deconstructing the reality with Chinese landscapes and showing the family relationship with oriental characteristics. In the last shot of the film, the fourth son, who has never got married, pushes back his sunglasses, gazes back at the mountains and then leaves. As the camera pans up, a city of tall buildings is presented in the center of the screen, which continues the ethereal feeling created by the film overall, but adds a faint sense of confusion and hope. The story is as tranquil as the water of the Fuchun River, but with a hidden turbulence. The water of the Fuchun River will continue to nurture generations after generations, witnessing them growing up and growing old here, in an endless cycle.

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