

Song Without Voice: The Power of the Vendor's Song in *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?*

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Abstract

*There is hardly any forum pertaining to India-Japan relations without a reference to India's *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* (1983), portraying a retired soldier after WWII who makes his living by collecting empty wine bottles, caused an immediate sensation and was nominated for 11 Golden Horse Awards. Not being able to speak, he substitutes the vendor's cry of the five Taiwanese syllables *jiu gan tan buei bo?* (any wine bottles for sale?) with a five-note tune played on a trumpet. This tune, which echoes throughout the entire film, quickly permeated Taiwanese consciousness. This paper examines the multifunctional role of this simple motif, a descent of three neighboring pentatonic pitches. Acting at first as the vendor's voice to collect bottles, this motif later becomes a way to cheer up and communicate with Mei, the abandoned baby girl he found. It soon symbolizes Mei's pain, humiliation (her schoolmates sing it to tease her), and desire to escape from poverty. It also represents the hardships and drinking problems of postwar society, parents' unconditional love, death, and agony of remorse. Mei ironically becomes a famous singer and is unable to visit Papa even when he passes away. Only in great sorrow can she sing his tune arranged to a song, the very theme song of the soundtrack that most Taiwanese are now familiar with. Today this vendor's song helps to define Taiwanese identity in relation to the postwar period.*

Keywords: Taiwan, World War II, postwar, film music.

Introduction

Few studies have been done on Taiwanese popular music with limited research articles (Yang, 1994). If there is a popular song that can represent a country and its people, *Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo* could be that song for Taiwan. This song became popular because it was the theme song for *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?*, a 1983 film nominated for 11 Golden Horse Awards directed by Yu Kangping. In the film, Uncle Mute, "a mute veteran mainlander who comes to settle in one of Taipei's juancun villages following the 1949 exodus," makes his living by collecting empty wine bottles (Teng, 2017). Unable to cry out for bottles like other vendors, he plays a five-note motif on his trumpet to substitute for the five Taiwanese syllables "jiu gan tan buei bo?" which literally means "any wine bottles for sale?". This five-note motif, extended to an eight-measure tune through repetition, becomes the only non-diegetic music for the film while it also appears as diegetic music very frequently. Diegetic music is when the sound source of the music is present in the scene (Chion, 1994). Just like how Indiana Jones would not exist without the well-recognized musical theme associated to Indiana Jones (Winters, 2010), *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* would not have existed without Uncle Mute's five-note motif. Permeating the entire film, this motif signifies far more than just a vendor's song. Uncle Mute's sympathetic tune symbolizes joy as soon as he finds an abandoned baby girl, named Mei, one morning when he is out collecting bottles. The motif also becomes Mei's source of joy and a way for Uncle Mute to communicate with her as she grows up before it turns into Mei's pain, humiliation, and desire to escape poverty. The fact that the five words of the vendor's song could never be heard adds to the sorrow. Mei, who ironically becomes a famous singer finally sings the words for him in a popular song arranged from this tune. As a whole, the five-note motif stands for the hardships of the poverty-stricken people in postwar Taiwan, parents' unconditional love and sacrifices, and is later expanded to reflect death, sorrow and remorse. Indeed, this simple and yet multifunctional five-note vendor's song does not only speak for Uncle Mute, Mei, and the other characters in the lower class community but its power also

transcends the screen and resonates with postwar Taiwanese culture. Indeed, leading theorist of media culture Douglas Kellner noted that “from the early 1980s to the present, Taiwanese filmmakers have produced an excellent series of films that explore social tensions and problems in cinematically compelling and often original ways, blending social realism with modernist innovation” (Kellner, 1998).

The Multiple Functions of the Five-note Motif

This five-note motif, a simple descent of three neighboring pentatonic pitches, serves multiple functions. First and foremost, Uncle Mute uses it as if it were his voice throughout his everyday life, and he depends on it to make his living collecting bottles. The viewers first hear the five-note motif coming out of his trumpet in the second scene when Uncle Mute pedals in his rickshaw carrying a full load of wine bottles. Starting on D#, he repeats each note once, stepping down the pentatonic scale until it reaches the third pitch. Even though he can never say the words, people interpret the five-note motif as “jiu gan tan buei bo” because the five notes, D# D# C# C# A#, resemble the intonation of a person calling out these Taiwanese words (Figure 1.a). Through a larger scale descent of the motif, Uncle Mute prolongs it to an eight-measure tune, referred to in this paper as the “wine-bottle tune.” In the “wine-bottle tune,” the motif is restated commencing on the second pitch C# of the original five-note set: C# C# A# A# G#. The only difference between the two five-note sets is the switching order of the major 2nd and minor 3rd intervals, in which the first set ends with a minor 3rd while the second set starts with it (Figure 1.b). These ten notes are then repeated, starting on the second pitch of the second set: A# A# G# G# E#, G# G# E# E# D# (Figure 1.c). Played four times, the motif returns to the original tonic pitch D# after the cycle of repetition moving down the pentatonic scale. Although it takes up eight measures of duration, the whole wine-bottle tune only consists of five pitches.

Figure 1. Breakdown of the “Wine-Bottle Tune”

- a) The five-note motif, substituting the vendor’s cry of the five Taiwanese syllables *jiu gan tan buei bo*? (any wine bottles for sale?)



- b) Motif restated commencing on the second pitch C# of the original five-note set



- c) The ten notes repeated, starting on the second pitch A# of the second set



Apart from the representation of Uncle Mute as a bottle collector, the vendor’s tune further represents the “dispossessed life of mainlanders and their dependents at a time of seismic urban transformation” (Kellner, 1998, p. 65). Collecting wine bottles and scraps was not an uncommon job in post-World War II Taiwan. In fact, in 1946, a year after WWII, a Taiwanese musician named Zhang Qiu Dong Song wrote a song entitled *Xiu Jiu Gan* or “collecting wine bottles” to reflect the difficulties

in the society at that time. This folk song soon became popular. In the song, the 13-year-old boy of a broken family described waking up early everyday and going from street to street asking for wine bottles and scraps from households. This song was later banned for some time by the Taiwanese government as the Chinese Communists started to use this song to satirize the government, highlighting the suffering that even young children had to endure in collecting wine bottles to survive (Zhuang, 2008). The chorus begins with “u jiu gan tan buei bo?”. The addition of “u” clarifies the interrogative nature of the street children and vendors’ cry. Furthermore, the melody of the six Taiwanese syllables in the folk song is very similar to Uncle Mute’s five-note tune. Indeed, both use the same three pitches, only in a different order, further supporting the similarity of the three neighboring pentatonic pitches to the Taiwanese intonation of the vendor’s cry.

As the wine-bottle tune formed by the five-note motif clearly shows, drinking constitutes a part of postwar Taiwanese society. Glasses representing alcohol are critical to the movie. Glasses and wine bottles appear in the opening credits, and the first scene shows Uncle Mute’s small apartment full of empty bottles. There are bottles on the kitchen table and a wall made out of bottles. As he leaves for work, his lover shouts, “Don’t forget to bring back a bottle of wine!” Although Uncle Mute is so poor, he regularly buys wine to enjoy with his lover. The importance of drinking is underlined by the scoring of the wine bottle tune with a synthesized glass sound. Moreover, the constant echo of Uncle Mute’s tune that starts with jiu gan (wine bottles) further emphasizes the drinking culture in the community. It is also interesting that the non-diegetic “wine-bottle tune” starts with a F# when it is played with the “glass sound.” The frequency of this glass sound and the assignment of a specific starting pitch suggest “glass” (which is what the wine bottle is made out of) is an important component of the film.

The role of this simple five-note motif is further expanded to reflect death and tragedy. In this film, death is also represented by D#, the original tonic pitch of Uncle Mute’s composition. This seems to suggest that Uncle Mute, who created the five-note motif starting with D#, is drawing closer to death. Every time a being passes away, the wine-bottle tune is played by strings starting on D#, and this first five-note set is repeated at least once before proceeding to the second set starting on C#. The repetition highlights the emptiness and the sorrow of the people. This first occurs when Uncle Mute’s neighbor Ah Man drowns, followed immediately by his house burns down and killing Ah Man’s brother-in-law. This continues when Ah Man’s son dies, and when Uncle Mute’s dog is killed in traffic. Uncle Mute eventually dies of a heart attack when he is watching Mei’s concert on the television. At the same time, Mei’s lover, Shi Junmai, finishes composing a song for her. The D# motif dies with Uncle Mute. His death is no longer represented by the motif starting on D#, but a half step lower instead, the D, which becomes the tonic pitch of the film’s theme song.

While signifying all the sad and pathetic themes, the same five-note motif symbolizes joy. First, Uncle Mute’s tune is associated with Mei who brings great joy to his life as soon as he finds her. In the third scene, when he starts picking up bottles, the wine-bottle tune is interrupted by the crying of a baby, followed soon by the voice-over of the grown-up Mei narrating the story of her being left on the sidewalk as a baby. Instead of picking up bottles and garbage, Uncle Mute picks up the baby who was thrown out like garbage. While we cannot hear a word from Uncle Mute, we hear the baby’s voice in two forms accompanying the tune: the crying and narration. This immediately associates the baby girl with Uncle Mute’s tune, informing the viewers that his tune is now shared by a new person. Even though the voice-over may suggest Mei’s role as the protagonist, the domination of Uncle Mute’s tune makes it clear that it is a story about both characters. This tune soon turns into a string orchestra version while the whole village bustles and welcomes the newborn baby. This is the first and only time in the movie that the wine-bottle tune begins on a different pitch, a G#, suggesting the incomparable significance of this scene. His job as a wine bottle collector has brought him the most important person in his life, the person who brings him great happiness. The next and probably the last celebratory moment in Uncle Mute’s postwar life is when the baby girl starts calling Uncle Mute “Papa.” The dramatic string orchestra version of the tune reoccurs as Uncle Mute holds the baby and runs out his house to inform his neighbors.

The tune also becomes Mei’s source of joy and a way for Uncle Mute to communicate with her especially when it begins with the pitch F. Even as a baby, Mei stops crying and start laughing every time Uncle Mute plays his tune on the trumpet. One time when she is upset and refuses to eat, Uncle Mute cheers her by tapping the different glasses on the table with a chopstick. The wine-bottle tune also becomes a way for Uncle Mute to call Mei to get her attention. As an illustration, there is a scene where

he strikes the bowls and plates on the dining table trying to call the grown-up Mei to come eat with him when dinner is ready. The tune starts on F in both scenes when Uncle Mute strikes the glasses. Whether to cheer her up or to call her, this five-note motif functions as a way to communicate with Mei as she grows up, and the pitch F seems to represent this particular function of the tune.

It does not take too long for this motif to turn from being Mei's source of joy to her source of pain. It all starts one day when Uncle Mute is giving her a ride to school on his rickshaw and she is requesting papa to pick her up after school. A boy runs by yelling the five syllables "jiu gan tan buei bo" (any wine bottles for sale) to Mei. She feels embarrassed and tells Uncle Mute to stop so that she can jump off the rickshaw. "Subjective hardship probably also depends on social comparison with reference groups in the school, the neighbourhood... Children may perceive themselves as poor or affluent by these comparisons rather than by "objective" economic criteria" (Huston, McLoyd, and Coll, 1994, p. 278). This is the first time these five words are spoken in the film. By this time, the viewers have already heard the five-note tune without the voice many times. Even if they do not already know the meaning of the tune, they can easily associate these five syllables with the five-note motif heard. Initially her joy found in the five-note motif becomes her pain and humiliation. She has promised herself and papa that she will make a lot of money so that he can buy a new house and no longer live in poverty. Therefore, this tune also stimulates her desire to escape from poverty.

The theme of parental love is also implied in the five-note motif as soon as Uncle Mute finds the abandoned baby girl: his job as a wine bottle collector has led him to a baby and having the baby girl means he has to work even harder to collect more bottles. He is willing to sacrifice anything for her including his lover and wine, the two most important parts of his life before finding her.

Later, the five-note motif has been arranged to a song that reflects a parent's unconditional love and sacrifices. Towards the end of the movie, after Mei has left Uncle Mute, the viewers finally get to see Uncle Mute play the complete wine-bottle tune. It is the first time in the film that this eight-measure wine-bottle tune is heard diegetically in its entirety. Songwriter Shi Junmai, Mei's former lover, hears the tune when he is outside Uncle Mute's apartment talking to Mrs. Man who describes how Mei was brought up with the tune. Shi Junmai is suddenly inspired to write a song for Mei to sing in her next concert and names it "Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo." He starts the song with the eight-measure wine-bottle tune, but it starts a half step lower from the original tonic pitch, a D instead of D#. This eight-measure bottle tune becomes the chorus of the song and the same five Taiwanese syllables, jiu gan tan buei bo, are heard four times when the five-note motif repeats in descending motion (Figure 2). Even though the song is written in Mandarin, the vendor's cry in Taiwanese, jiu gan tan buei bo, is preserved in the chorus and the title of the song, thereby retaining Uncle Mute's voice. Mei's voice is also represented through the change of lyrics when the chorus returns. In Mandarin, she sings to her papa: "Without heaven, where would earth be? Without earth, where would home be? Without home, where would you be? Without you, where would I be?" By singing Uncle Mute's tune, Mei directly relates to Uncle Mute, acknowledging a father's unconditional love for his daughter.

Figure 2. The eight-measure bottle tune becomes the chorus of the song *Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo*



Uncle Mute's wine-bottle tune not only serves as a muse for Shi Junmai, but it is also the musical core for his composition that becomes the movie's theme song. While the chorus is quoted from the descending wine-bottle tune, the verse, also eight-measures long, is formed by the same five pitches, only in ascending motion. By limiting the entire song to the original tune's eight-measure construction and the use of only five pitches, Shi Junmai preserves the simplicity of Uncle Mute's vendor's song.

Finally, this five-note motif or wine-bottle tune symbolizes Mei's agony of remorse. While Uncle Mute cannot speak a word, Mei ironically has an excellent voice. An agent discovers her, and she soon becomes a star who performs around Asia. While her dream could be inspired by her childhood desire

to escape from poverty, it could also be stimulated by the post-war modernization. According to Professor of Sociology and Anthropology Dr. Wen-hui Tsai, “Modernization is a process which involves transformation of all systems by which people organize society, that is, the psychological, social, economic...” (1989, p. 25). Wilbert E. Moore thinks that “modernization may be more closely identified as rationalization of the ways social life is organized and social activities are performed” (1979, p. 1). Mei’s new lifestyle and busy schedule prevent her from visiting Uncle Mute. Although Mei dreamed of becoming a singer and providing Uncle Mute a better life, Uncle Mute suffers from her fame, as he misses her so much that he becomes ill and depressed. It was discovered in psychological studies that “bidirectional influences of parent and child on one another might exacerbate dysfunctional interactions over time, so that effect sizes for depressed fathers are greatest by the time children are in adolescence” (Wilson and Durbin, 2010, p. 169). His drinking habit gets worse and worsens his heart problem. While watching Mei’s concert on the television, Uncle Mute suddenly collapses before he gets to hear her sing *Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo*. Mrs. Man rushes to Mei’s concert to bring her to see Uncle Mute before he dies. Unfortunately, Uncle Mute has already passed away, and will never be able to hear her sing when there is finally a voice added to his tune. Her crying at the hospital is joined by the wine-bottle tune played with strings starting on D, dissolving to her singing *Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo* on stage in the concert. This is the first time the viewers get to hear the song with a voice. The title *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* reveals how much Mei wants her papa to hear his tune in her song but Uncle Mute who has passed away will never hear it. This voice remains unheard.

Discussion

The simplest motif can turn into the most powerful force. This is clearly shown through all the different functions and the significance this five-note motif serves throughout *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* (1983). Even though this film may not be regarded as a musical, the five-note motif is critical to the plot. Without this motif motivating the plot line and intertwining the different parts of the film together, this film is merely a melodrama. Indeed, this film is considered to be “melodramatic and maudlin by Western standards” (Mannikka, 2008). As illustrated, the five-note motif does not only act as Uncle Mute’s voice and the vendor’s cry, but it also symbolizes joy, a way to call and communicate with Mei, Mei’s pain, humiliation, and desire, as well as the hardships and drinking problems of postwar society, parents’ unconditional love and sacrifices, death, sorrow, and agony of remorse. This motif that forms the wine-bottle tune is further reinforced by the popular song *Jiu Gan Tan Buei Bo* composed by Shi Junmai in the movie (Hou Dejian as the actual composer and Luo Dayou as the lyricist), which has become the very theme song of the film and the soundtrack album familiar to most Taiwanese (Mello, 2019). It all starts with Uncle Mute’s simple intention to substitute the vendor’s cry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Uncle Mute could neither speak the words of the tune he composed when he was alive, nor hear them when Mei finally sings them. Nevertheless, this unheard voice speaks a thousand words through the simplest five-note motif that leads to the wine-bottle tune and eventually the theme song of an award-winning movie. Indeed, the relation between music and emotions have long been explored by theorists (Saiz-Clar and Reales, 2018). The song’s continued familiarity over the past 35 years suggests the tune resonates with Taiwanese society and helps to define their identity in relation to the postwar period.

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